

ABSTRACT

The Legitimacy of the Comic:
Kierkegaard and the Importance of the Comic for His Ethics and Theology

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While some consider the comic to be a trivial subject, fit mainly for amusement or distraction, Søren Kierkegaard disagrees. This dissertation examines Kierkegaard's understanding of the nature of the comic and how he believes even the triviality of comic jest to be deeply tied to ethical and theological earnestness.

First, I examine Kierkegaard's understanding of the comic, irony, and humor, drawing primarily from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846). I argue that, for Kierkegaard, the comic is a contradiction or misrelation that is essentially though not absolutely painless, providing a "way out." The comic is a contradiction between norms, suggesting that it springs from one's perspective in a way that holds important implications for one's ethical and theological worldview. Kierkegaard believes that subjective development is closely tied to one's capacity to perceive the comic, making the comic both diagnostic of and formative for one's subjective state. For him, the Christian is far from humorless, instead having the maximum human capacity to perceive the comic.

Next, I show that the previously argued conception of the comic can be found in other works by Kierkegaard: *Prefaces* (1844), *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (1847), and the *Corsair* affair (c.1845-1848).

Then, I examine representatives of the Deconstructionist tradition of reading Kierkegaard, namely Louis Mackey, Roger Poole, Elsebet Jegstrup, and Mark C. Taylor. I argue that, while they accurately perceive the widespread irony in Kierkegaard's corpus, they incorrectly conclude that such irony is a sign of his lack of earnest interest in philosophy and theology. Their conclusion stems from a misunderstanding of what Kierkegaard believes the nature of irony to be.

Finally, I consider two contemporary representatives of the tradition of reading Kierkegaard theologically, namely Murray Rae and W. Glenn Kirkconnell. I argue that, while their instincts regarding Kierkegaard are generally preferable to those of the Deconstructionist tradition, they lack the latter's awareness of Kierkegaard's use of the comic and willingness to let it influence their conclusions. Their already significant arguments would, I suggest, be strengthened and extended with an increased appreciation for the legitimate function that Kierkegaard believes the comic to play for ethics and theology.

The Legitimacy of the Comic:
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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>CA</i>	<i>The Concept of Anxiety</i> , trans. Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).
<i>CI</i>	<i>The Concept of Irony</i> , trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).
<i>COR</i>	<i>The Corsair Affair; Articles Related to the Writings</i> , trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).
<i>CUP 1</i>	<i>Concluding Unscientific Postscript</i> , vol. 1, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992)..
<i>CUP 2</i>	<i>Concluding Unscientific Postscript</i> , vol. 2, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).
<i>EO1</i>	<i>Either/Or</i> , Part I, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).
<i>EO2</i>	<i>Either/Or</i> , Part II, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).
<i>EUD</i>	<i>Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses</i> , trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).
<i>FT</i>	<i>Fear and Trembling</i> , trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
<i>JFY</i>	<i>Judge For Yourself!</i> , trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).
<i>JP</i>	<i>Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers</i> , ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk, vols. 1-6, vol. 7 Index and Composite Collation (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1967-78).
<i>P</i>	<i>Prefaces / Writing Sampler</i> , trans. Todd W. Nichol (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

- Pap.* *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, eds. P. A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr, and E. Torsting, 1st edn., vols. I to XI-3 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1909-48). 2nd edn., vols. I to XI-3 by Niels Thulstrup, vols. XII to XIII supplementary volumes, ed. Niels Thulstrup, vols. XIV to XVI index by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968-78).
- PC* *Practice in Christianity*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).
- PF* *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).
- POV* *The Point of View* including *On My Work as an Author* and *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, and *Armed Neutrality*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
- R* *Repetition*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
- SKS* *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, eds. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, Jette Knudsen, Johnny Kondrup, Alastair McKinnon, and Finn Hauberg Mortensen, Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret, vols. 1-14, 17-26 (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1997-2010).
- TA* *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age. A Literary Review*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).
- UDVS* *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

KEY TO REFERENCES

References to Kierkegaard's works include both the standard Danish edition (*Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*) and the standard English translation (by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong), which are separated by a slash. Both references include volume number, where applicable, and page numbers.

Examples:

SKS 7, 465-69 / *CUP* 1, 514-16.

SKS 4, 446-451 / *CA*, 146-51.

If *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, being a work in progress, does not yet include the text referred to, the reference is given to the volumes of *Samlede Værker* (*SVI*).

Example:

XII 455 / *JFY*, 186.

References to Kierkegaard's journals and notebooks are given to the *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, where possible, and to *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers* (ed. and trans. By Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong), which are separated by a slash. The *SKS* citation is keyed to Kierkegaard's journal label (E.g., AA, BB, NB, etc.) and entry

number. The *Journals and Papers* citation is keyed to volume number and entry number (not page number, unless otherwise specified).

Examples:

DD:3 / *JP* 2, 1681.

JJ:261 / *JP* 1, 705.

NB12:164 / *JP* 2, 1762.

If *SKS* does not include a journal text, the *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer* citation is given instead.

Example:

Pap. I A 158 / *JP* 2, 1672.

If a footnote is referenced rather than the main text, this is indicated in the citation. The *SKS* page number is the page where the citation is found, not necessarily, as in cases where the note spreads across several pages, the page that begins the note. The page number is followed by a period and the footnote number. The Hong English citation includes the relevant volume and pages numbers, followed by “n” to indicate “note” or, rarely, “nn” to indicate the second note on the page.

Example:

SKS 7, 473.1 / *CUP* 1, 521n.

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Special thanks go to my mother, now deceased, and my father and other family members who have provided me with ample encouragement and support as I pursued this project. Their love, laughter, prayers, and support have buoyed my passion and shown me a way.

Will Williams
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To my Mother

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

It might be thought foolish to write a dissertation on the subject of the comic. To do so is to address a subject in a medium that is strongly at variance with it in both manner and content. To read such a dissertation in the hopes of finding diverting amusement would, I expect, be very like reading a cookbook when one is hungry.¹ Further, even if one were to profit by such a reading, one might be led to the misunderstanding that a greater conceptual grasp of the comic is equivalent or approximately equivalent to a greater mastery of the practice of the comic. Kierkegaard, though, knows better, and consistently distinguishes between the conception of a thing and the existential appropriation of the same thing. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard has his pseudonym Johannes de Silentio say, “There is a lot of talk these days about irony and humor, especially by people who have never been able to practice them but nevertheless know how to explain everything.”² It is hoped that the previous quotation will not serve as a trenchant commentary on this dissertation.

At the same time, a greater conceptual understanding of the comic is not to be feared. Some may hesitate, thinking that an increased understanding of the comic, particularly increased clarity regarding its relation to ethics and theology, might take the “fun” out of it or somehow lessen the comic enjoyment. This does not necessarily

¹ DD:29 / JP 4, 3855.

² SKS 4, 145 / FT, 51.

follow, especially since a greater understanding of the comic may well sharpen one's use of it into an instrument of even greater incisiveness and precision. Moreover, if laughter is harmed in some way by such an understanding, the pseudonym Johannes Climacus considers this to be no great loss: "It is also satisfying to analyze properly the source of the laughter, and many a person would perhaps lose laughter by understanding it; but a person like that has never really had a sense of the comic...."³ If greater understanding harms the comic, it indicates a defectiveness in the form of the comic being harmed, and indeed such a malformed comic would likely have been in the service of greater harm than good and so is perhaps better off in having its power muted.

The goal of this dissertation is to come to a greater understanding of what Søren Kierkegaard means when he speaks of the comic as having a legitimate function, specifically in relation to his ethics and theology.⁴ For many, the comic has powerful

³ *SKS* 7, 471.1 / *CUP* 1, 519n.

⁴ A clarification should be given regarding my chosen terminology of "ethics and theology" and, additionally, their relation to "religiousness." I understand the phrase "ethics and theology" from my title to refer primarily to the scholarly and reflective disciplines of ethics and theology. Etymologically, "theology" suggests language about God, which puts it in the category of reflection and, to some degree, abstraction. A scholar has a valuable role in thinking carefully about such matters, hopefully in order to clarify concepts for his readership. This dissertation too is intended to be a scholarly work written with a scholarly audience in mind, and it is hoped that, through a clarified presentation of Kierkegaard's understanding of the comic, reflections in the scholarly guild about Kierkegaard's ethics and theology and about ethics and theology more broadly may come to be more open to receiving the comic as a useful and earnest resource. Ethics and theology are not realms too high-minded or earnest for the comic to poke its head in.

"Religiousness" and "the religious," on the other hand, will be used in this dissertation to indicate existential concerns that are correlate to the more reflective "theology," such as questions of how to live, what to believe, the state of one's soul in relation to God and to others, how best to respond to feelings of guilt or terror, how to improve as a human being, etc. This is in keeping with Kierkegaard's own use of the term, for whom "the religious" is a category of existence rather than a category of doctrine or a sociological category for the objective classification of the tenets and practices of world faiths. (It should be added that Kierkegaard does occasionally use "the religious" to refer to non-Christian religions. However, as he is living in and writing to Lutheran Denmark in the 19th century, "the religious" and "religiousness" should not necessarily be taken to indicate something other than Christianity. Context will be essential, but a Christian allusion is generally the safer assumption. For example, quotations below speak of "the religious" in the context of Sunday worship, clearly implying that Christian religiousness is what is being considered.)

connotations of illegitimacy. The comic is, perhaps, primarily associated with prurient, light-minded, or insulting entertainment. Even at a more innocent level, the comic is frequently seen as a disruption, distracting people from whatever serious task may be at hand. This sense is often more pronounced when the serious matter is of any ethical or religious weight. Such is a time for serious attention and reflection, it is thought, not for frivolous laughter. Kierkegaard is certainly aware of the tension that can exist between comic and religious attitudes. The comic mindset is often antagonistic towards the religious mindset, fearful that religious gravity will dampen its fun. The religious mindset, in turn, is often antagonistic towards the comic mindset, fearful of the comic's disruptive potential to make light of matters of the utmost importance. Kierkegaard believes, though, that the relationship is more complicated than one of simple and unqualified opposition.⁵ Peculiarly—and almost uniquely—he maintains great

In this dissertation, Kierkegaard's conception of the comic is understood to be relevant both to the more abstractly reflective categories of "ethics and theology" as well as to the existential matter of living humanly within ethical and religious categories. Kierkegaard often speaks of the comic in relation to questions of existence, even defining irony and humor not as merely rhetorical descriptions but as categories that most fundamentally describe a human being's manner of existing. (This comports with Climacus' stated concern that people have become so concerned with objective knowledge that they have left behind questions about how to exist religiously and humanly [SKS 7, 226 / CUP 1, 249]). Kierkegaard was very skilled at abstract reflection and in writing in those categories, but such reflection is always for him in service not to reflection itself but to embodiment in human existence. (Consider how even his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, for all of its conceptual distinctions and historical surveys, concludes with a message about how controlled irony may be beneficial to the way people live and mature subjectively. He says, "Furthermore, if our generation has any task at all, it must be to translate the achievement of scientific scholarship into personal life, to appropriate it personally" [SKS 1, 356 / CI, 328]). My dissertation carries a similar hope. It must, by its nature, be a conceptual exercise, written from scholarly reflection and to scholarly reflection, addressing the comic in relation to "ethics and theology." Ethics and theology, though, are meant to be practiced, believed, and lived. Even scholars are people. It is hoped that, amidst the abstract reflection and conceptual clarification of this work, that this little note in favor of human existence will not be forgotten.

⁵ E.g., "On the whole, there is nothing as protectively escorted by the comic as the religious, and its nemesis is nowhere so promptly at hand as in the sphere of the religious" (SKS 7, 442.1 / CUP 1, 487n).

confidence that, despite the comic's negative influence seen also in his own day, the comic has enormous potential for cultivating ethical and religious living.⁶

In fact, even in a passage addressing the problems of a culture that ludicrously and carelessly indulges in the comic almost everywhere, Kierkegaard has his pseudonym strongly critique the religious mindset that wants nothing to do with the comic. He indicates that the comic is an important feature of everyday human existence, and the religious mindset that would excuse itself from the comic simultaneously is segregating itself in a falsely pious way, disconnecting itself from the very human existence in which it should have the most interest:

The religious does not dare to ignore what occupies people's lives so very much, what continually comes up again every day in conversations, in social intercourse, in books, in the modification of the entire life-view, unless Sunday performances in church are supposed to be a kind of indulgence in which with morose devoutness for one hour a person buys permission to laugh freely all week long.⁷

The implication is that the religious that sets itself free of the comic is a poor form of the religious that abandons its task. Further, it sets loose the complementary problem of a form of the comic that seems to take nothing seriously, including the religious. A mirthless religiousness and an irreligious comic both testify to a divorce that Kierkegaard believes, on both counts, to be unhealthy and deeply misunderstanding of human nature and of the true nature of the comic. If the comic appears to be illegitimate, this is because of its unnatural distance from the religious. Equally to blame is the shabby religiousness

⁶ Some may be surprised to hear of Kierkegaard's high estimation of the comic, given his reputation for being exceptionally melancholy. For example, W. H. Auden penned an article about Kierkegaard entitled, "A Knight of Doleful Countenance" (W. H. Auden, "A Knight of Doleful Countenance," *The New Yorker*, May 25, 1968: 141). To be sure, Kierkegaard acknowledged his own tendencies towards melancholy, but he also had a sharp wit and a keen comic sense. Kierkegaard's comic powers granted him a humorous spirit and an insight into the nature of the comic that should not be downplayed in the name of caricature.

⁷ *SKS* 7, 465 / *CUP* 1, 513.

that happily insulates itself from the comic and, consequently, from human existence. A legitimate form of the comic would be rightly reconciled to the religious. He continues:

The question of the legitimacy of the comic, of its relation to the religious, whether it itself has legitimate significance in the religious address, this question is of essential importance for a religious existence in our time, in which the comic runs off with the victory everywhere. To cry “alas and woe” over this manifestation merely shows how little the defenders respect the religious that they are defending, since it shows far greater respect for the religious to demand that it be installed in its rights in everyday life rather than affectedly to hold it off at a Sunday distance.⁸

The interest shown in the comic is not for the sake of the comic alone. It is fundamentally an interest in religious existence. For Kierkegaard, the comic question is the Christian question. To lament the wayward comic and thus to shun the comic as such is a mistake that is not made better by being done in the name of protecting religion. Indeed, to do so is fundamentally to insult not the comic but *the religious*, which is presumed to be too delicate and sickly to fraternize with the robust comic and is therefore stripped of its rightful claims on everyday existence. This fussy religiousness becomes enervated by its retreat into ever more rarified air until it divests itself of its divinely-appointed task to existence and its witness of the incarnation.

The path towards solution, Kierkegaard believes, is to restore people with an existential appropriation of the legitimate comic. The legitimate comic has both diagnostic and formative powers regarding ethics and Christianity. What this means and how Kierkegaard intends to move towards the reconciliation between the comic and ethical and religious living will be addressed in the dissertation. For Kierkegaard, the error of understanding the comic as pure jest and religiousness as pure earnestness, thus setting the two in exclusive opposition, is a misunderstanding of both elements and of

⁸ Ibid.

their proper relation to one another. Recognizing the proper relation that the comic has towards religiousness and its concomitant interest in existence is essential to restoring the comic's place as a legitimate element in ethical and religious reflection.

In order to elucidate Kierkegaard's position on the comic, I take the following procedure in this dissertation. In Part One, the structural heart of my argument, I examine Kierkegaard's views of the nature and function of the comic, drawing heavily from his most comprehensive treatment of the topic, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846). As is necessary and helpful to supplement the discussion, I will also draw on his journal writings and various other published works. The goal here is to clarify Kierkegaard's understanding of the comic, as presented by the pseudonym Johannes Climacus,⁹ and not to create an alien account of the comic that is only inspired by

⁹ The issue of pseudonymity in Kierkegaard is no small subject, and a word on the matter should be given here. Kierkegaard wrote *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* under the pseudonym "Johannes Climacus," although he did also include his own name on the title page as editor (SKS 7, 7 / CUP 1, 1). Therefore, it seems that with *Postscript*, as with his other pseudonymously written works, Kierkegaard's purpose was not to hide the fact that he was the author, a matter that had become something of an open secret among the literary circles of Copenhagen in any case. Rather, Kierkegaard used pseudonyms as a literary device to create characters for purposes of clarifying matters of Christian existence. Rather than succumb to abstract philosophizing, as the Hegelians tended to do, Kierkegaard created plausible authors who could show an existential appropriation of the ideas they advocated. Hence, to discuss the nature of the comic, Kierkegaard uses a confessed humorist, Johannes Climacus, in order to ground the potentially abstract discussion in the existence of Climacus' subjectivity. Kierkegaard desired that the views of his pseudonyms not be sloppily confused for his own (SKS 7, 571 / CUP 1, 627), and I will be careful to draw the proper distinctions as they become relevant to the purposes of this work. For example, while Kierkegaard is a Christian author who uses the writings of Johannes Climacus to prevent Christianity's being confused with popular Hegelian beliefs of the day, the figure of Johannes Climacus is a mere humorist who is no Christian himself (SKS 7, 438 / CUP 1, 483; SKS 7, 454 / CUP 1, 501). But even drawing such distinctions does not preclude the possibility of Kierkegaard's agreeing with one of his pseudonyms on certain, or even several, matters.

In general, I follow C. Stephen Evans in his account of Kierkegaard's pseudonymity (C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* [Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999], 6-9), in which Climacus is taken to be an especially hospitable pseudonym for finding similarities to Kierkegaard's own thinking. Evans says that, more than almost any other pseudonym, Johannes Climacus "seems to express views that lie at the core of Kierkegaard's own thought" (Ibid., 8). (In support of this conclusion is the historical fact of Kierkegaard's original intention to have *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* be the capstone and conclusion of his authorship). More to the point, Evans finds no significant differences between Kierkegaard's and Climacus' views of humor, which is my more immediate concern (C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self* [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006], 84). Consequently, I will not unreflectively identify Climacus' positions with

Kierkegaard's views. At times, I must speak on matters where Kierkegaard has spoken only briefly or allusively, but when I do so my aim is one of fidelity and not free speculation, so I will refer to textual support whenever possible. This section seeks to clarify what is meant by Climacus' description of the comic as based in contradiction with a "way out" and how it influences one ethically and theologically through the use of latent norms.

In the second half of Part One, I illustrate that Kierkegaard's view of the comic, argued for in Chapter Two, is found beyond the confines of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Specifically, I examine Kierkegaard's use of the comic in *Prefaces* (1844), in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (1847), and in the assembled documents entitled *The Corsair Affair* (1845-ca. 1848). This assortment of three sources is chosen for its proximity to *Postscript*, coming relatively soon before and after its publication in 1846. The assortment is also chosen for its diversity, including works from both Kierkegaard's first and second authorships, works written amidst both public controversy and relative peace, works that are both signed and pseudonymous, and works that are both explicitly religious and not. The intention is to demonstrate that the view of the comic found in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* cannot be limited to one pseudonym alone (for example, in an attempt to distinguish the position from Kierkegaard himself) and that it is not wholly the product of one moment in his thinking, perhaps quickly

Kierkegaard's, but, for my purposes of examining the conception of the comic, Climacus and Kierkegaard will be assumed to be so similar that constant distinguishing will be omitted. My method of frequently interspersing quotations from Climacus' *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* with entries from Kierkegaard's journals and selections from other works by Kierkegaard are meant, primarily, to lend support to the arguments I make concerning Kierkegaard's writings but also, secondarily, to imply Climacus' proximity to Kierkegaard himself by showing identical or similar ideas presented either under Kierkegaard's own name or in such wide-ranging contexts that it may be inferred that the author who stands above the pseudonyms is the true source of such ideas.

abandoned or created *ex nihilo* in distinction from earlier thought. Rather, the view of the comic argued for in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is found, in greater and lesser degrees of clarity, within works of great variety surrounding *Postscript*'s publication, and it may well be that the view can be found across an even greater variety of Kierkegaard's writings, as my wide-ranging citations suggest. The implication is that this is because the view of the comic found in *Postscript* is not merely one concocted for the tactical purposes of one work but, instead, is representative of Kierkegaard's own view.

In Part Two, I consider scholarly receptions of Kierkegaard whose arguments ought to be reconsidered in light of the previous description of Kierkegaard's understanding of the comic. In the first half of Part Two, I examine four representatives of the Deconstructionist tradition of reading Kierkegaard: Louis Mackey, Roger Poole, Elsebet Jegstrup, and Mark C. Taylor. Though not presenting identical readings of Kierkegaard, all four Deconstructionists find irony to be at the heart of Kierkegaard's project. Further, they construe Kierkegaard's use of irony in such a way that they use it to discount or downplay claims that Kierkegaard is an earnest writer of philosophy and theology. I argue that their misunderstanding of what Kierkegaard means by irony is fundamental to their inadequate readings of his works. By pitting irony against earnestness, they are led to a fundamental misunderstanding of Kierkegaard's project, and it is suggested that my variant account of Kierkegaard's use of irony, humor, and the comic could serve as a helpful corrective.

In the second half of Part Two, I examine two contemporary scholars who evidence a theological interest in Kierkegaard: Murray Rae and W. Glenn Kirkconnell. I argue that, while their instincts for how to read Kierkegaard are generally preferable to

those of the Deconstructionist tradition, they lack the latter's awareness of Kierkegaard's use of the comic and willingness to let it influence their conclusions. Their already significant theological arguments would, I suggest, be strengthened and extended with an increased appreciation for the legitimate function that Kierkegaard believes the comic to play for ethics and theology.

In the course of this dissertation, my central theme is that Kierkegaard believes there to be a fundamental earnestness to the comic that, whether commonly recognized or not, gives it its distinctively polemical character. It is this earnestness that enables the comic to have a legitimate relation to both ethics and theology for Kierkegaard. The comic, therefore, should not be dismissed as either a trivial distraction or a necessary corruption of any given serious matter at hand, such as the tasks of ethics and theology. Kierkegaard believes the comic to have a twofold function that legitimizes its relationship to such matters: first, he believes the comic to function diagnostically, measuring one's subjective development or, to put it another way, one's competency at existing; second, he believes the comic to have the potential to influence people in such a way that their existence may be formed through repeated comic encounters. The comic, on this account, plays an important role in ethical growth and ultimately, it is hoped, trains one for the rigors of even religious existence. While the comic is not superior or equal to religious faith in Kierkegaard's account, he does grant it a role that might be described as *praeparatio evangelica*.

PART I. KIERKEGAARD'S CONCEPTION OF THE COMIC

CHAPTER TWO

Kierkegaard's Conception of the Comic Set Forth

In the 1846 work, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Johannes Climacus,¹ addresses the question of "the legitimacy of the comic" in its relation to the religious.² That the comic has a legitimate role to play in relation to religion in general and in relation to Christianity more specifically will be addressed at a later point. Since the comic is present in every stage of life,³ though, it needs to be explained with care and clarity what legitimate role the comic plays throughout the stages of subjective maturation and what, more precisely, the nature of the comic is thought to be in order to have a legitimate function in these matters.

Howard Hong has noted that very few philosophers have taken humor as seriously as Kierkegaard did and that he is perhaps the only philosopher of religion who has considered Christianity to be the ultimate humorous worldview.⁴ Regarding humor, Mark C. Taylor has observed that the overwhelming number of references in Kierkegaard to "humor" and "humorist" occur in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*,⁵ and there is

¹ See Introduction for a brief discussion of pseudonymity in Kierkegaard's writing.

² *SKS* 7, 465 / *CUP* 1, 513.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Howard V. Hong, "The Comic, Satire, Irony, and Humor: Kierkegaardian Reflections," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 1, eds. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein (1976): 98. See *DD*:3 / *JP* 2, 1681.

⁵ Mark C. Taylor, "Humor and Humorist," in *Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana* vol. 3: *Concepts and Alternatives in Kierkegaard*, ed. Marie Mikulová Thulstrup (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Boghandel, 1980), 221.

good reason to believe that *Postscript* is the single most important of Kierkegaard's works for considering humor, irony, and the comic more generally.⁶ For example, Robert Roberts has said of Climacus and his work that without them many of his own thoughts on humor and virtue could not have been written.⁷ Consequently, *Postscript* will be my most important source for a close reading of what Kierkegaard understands the nature of the comic to be.⁸

The pseudonym Johannes Climacus expresses great confidence in his own understanding of the comic. Climacus confesses to being armed with "a more than

⁶ John Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 4. This work of Lippitt's is the best single treatment of Kierkegaard's understanding of the comic I have come across. It comes closer than any other one work to my project here, and it is worth reading in its own right. As accomplished as it is, though, it could go further in its argument, occasionally stating in a qualified or brief way what should be addressed more strongly and extensively while sometimes altogether omitting something I consider to be essential to the matter at hand. Certainly, of course, there are places where I part from Lippitt's explanations, and some of these will be made clear in the course of the chapter, but the worthiness of Lippitt's work should not be considered diminished thereby.

⁷ Robert C. Roberts, "Humor and the Virtues," *Inquiry*, 31 (June 1988): 149n29.

⁸ One might also suspect that Kierkegaard's dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, would be a significant locus for Kierkegaard's thought on irony specifically. This is true in a qualified way. Because *The Concept of Irony* is an occasion for Kierkegaard to think deeply about the nature of irony, it can be useful in its insight, and I will occasionally reference it when appropriate. This work, however, should not be used to give a determinative account of Kierkegaard's conception of irony for several reasons. First, *The Concept of Irony* is a very early work in Kierkegaard's writings. While there are helpful indications there of places that he would go conceptually in the future, Kierkegaard's statements in his dissertation are not always consistent with later formulations. Some of the positions presented in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* may be intimated in *The Concept of Irony*, but the dissertation does not yet attain Kierkegaard's mature expression of the comic as found in *Postscript*. Second, as a dissertation, *The Concept of Irony* has certain strictures placed on it by its nature, and it may be that in places Kierkegaard's thinking is constrained by the necessities and expectations for a dissertation. Third, Kierkegaard did not consider *The Concept of Irony* to be a part of his official "authorship." When reflecting back on his authorship later in life, Kierkegaard named *Either/Or* (1843) as the beginning of his official authorship, not counting earlier writings such as his dissertation, which he defended in 1841 (XIII 522 / *POV*, 29n. See *POV*, 315n9). Fourth, Kierkegaard occasionally expresses displeasure about aspects of his dissertation. For example, Kierkegaard is far more approving of Hegelian positions in his dissertation than he would come to be later in life. Reflecting on his dissertation after several years, then, Kierkegaard criticizes his former lack of maturity and even declared of his younger self, "What a Hegelian fool I was!" (NB21:35 / *JP* 4, 4281). Again, he has Climacus criticize him by name for his flawed presentation of Socrates in his dissertation (*SKS* 7, 89.1 / *CUP* 1, 90n). Therefore, while *The Concept of Irony* will not be dismissed altogether, it is the account found within *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that will be my most determinative source.

ordinary sense of the comic”⁹ and assures the reader, “If there is anything I have studied thoroughly, from A to Z, it is the comic.”¹⁰ When Climacus makes pronouncements about the comic, then, one is to understand that such thoughts come not from a comedic dilettante but from a true comic master. Indeed, similar superlatives of comic mastery could also be attributed to Kierkegaard,¹¹ who spent years applying his analytical and dialectical mind to the task of unraveling the mysteries of irony and humor.

What Kierkegaard Means by “the Comic”

What, though, does Kierkegaard mean by “the comic”? First, by the term he does not mean to suggest “comedy” as a genre of the theater, as contrasted to “tragedy.” It is true that Climacus does consider the comic in its similarity to and dissimilarity from the tragic,¹² but these are his own technical definitions of the terms, and they are not constituted by dramatic classifications. As Sylvia Walsh notes, Kierkegaard reinterprets aesthetic categories as existential categories.¹³ It is not altogether surprising, given his

⁹ SKS 7, 564 / CUP 1, 622.

¹⁰ SKS 7, 438 / CUP 1, 483.

¹¹ E.g., Andrew J. Burgess, “A Word-Experiment on the Category of the Comic,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Corsair Affair*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990), 119.

¹² E.g., SKS 7, 465-66 / CUP 1, 514.

¹³ Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard’s Existential Aesthetics* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 6.

Because Kierkegaard was so disturbed by K. W. F. Schlegel’s ethically and existentially problematic use of irony, it entirely overshadowed for him any aesthetic common ground they might have had. As Söderquist puts it, “[I]t turns out that what would seem to be the most obvious shared territory [between Kierkegaard and Schlegel]—their mutual interest in indirect, witty communication, that is, rhetorical irony—turns out to be the least of Kierkegaard’s explicit interests in Schlegel” (K. Brian Söderquist, “Friedrich Schlegel: On Ironic Communication, Subjectivity and Selfhood” in *Kierkegaard and His German Contemporaries, Tome III: Literature and Aesthetics*, ed. Jon Stewart, vol. 6, tome 3 of *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, ed. Jon Stewart [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008], 190). Kierkegaard is utterly uninterested in exploring the rhetorical similarities between Schlegel’s use of irony and his own. Rather, irony’s import for ethics, religion, and existence are what catches his interest.

critique of objective thought and of life lived in aesthetic terms, that Kierkegaard would not be very interested in speaking of “comedy” as an objective classification of aesthetic productions. Instead of classifying something firmly as “comedy” or “tragedy,” for example, he even speaks of existential realities that can be simultaneously understood as comic *and* tragic, depending on the vantage: “The individual is tragic because of his passion and comic because of staking it on an approximation.”¹⁴ Indeed, one of the challenges of an existing thinker is the difficulty of seeing the comic and the tragic in the same thing at the same time.¹⁵ While the genres of comedy and tragedy have been profitably used to inform thoughtful analysis, including analysis of an explicitly Christian variety,¹⁶ Kierkegaard does not predominantly speak of the comic in the tradition of the theater.¹⁷

As Climacus says, “Irony is an existence-qualification, and thus nothing is more ludicrous than regarding it as a style of speaking...” (SKS 7, 457 / CUP 1, 503-4).

¹⁴ SKS 7, 49 / CUP 1, 43.

¹⁵ SKS 7, 324 / CUP 1, 354.

¹⁶ E.g., Ralph C. Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption: Christian Faith and Comic Vision in Four American Novelists* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 280-85. One discovers quickly that Wood’s conception of comedy draws on traditional theatrical categories. One might think, for example, of Shakespeare’s comedies, which entail joyful resolutions that are typically marked by the happy reconciliation of marriage. Consider Wood’s language describing the comedy of Christian redemption: the cross and resurrection constitute “an irreversible comic triumph”; faith is a “humble and humorous” acknowledgement and a “comic confession”; Christ’s deliverance makes life “a joyful celebration” and “an endless delight”; belief in God’s redemption “yields no quarter to the grim visage and the humorless doubt”; Christians are not permitted “to sit like ‘melancholy owls’ in frowning disdain for the transient scene below”; Christians are not “humorlessly appalled” at the world but have “gaiety and gladness” and “joy” over God’s redemption; “Comic serenity” not “anger and alienation” marks the believer; the Bible, far from being “the unfunniest of books,” contains the ultimate cause for “laughter and rejoicing”; and Christians are freed for “singing and playing and dancing before the ark of our redemption” (Ibid., 53-56). Christian redemption is described as the happy resolution of comedy, where joy is abundant, as opposed to the grim despondency of the tragic vision. Joyful celebration, more than, say, the slapstick of the comically funny, is the predominant description here.

Wood, citing Karl Barth, argues that the divine comedy of the Christian gospel is “undialectical” (Ibid., 31, 34-37, 59-60). While it appears that Reinhold Niebuhr’s dialectic is what is predominantly in view here, it may be that Søren Kierkegaard also falls under Wood’s critique (though, of course, as Kierkegaard’s own critique of Hegel makes clear, not all varieties of the dialectical are created equal. To find fault with one method of dialectic is not necessarily to find fault with another). While Wood’s

Second, when Climacus addresses the comic in *Postscript*, it is not as if he is merely collecting a compendium of jokes and amusing stories. As Burgess puts it, Kierkegaard “does not simply identify comic writing where it occurs; he wants to know why it is comic, what makes it comic,”¹⁸ which makes the category of the comic a “second-order concept” for Kierkegaard, used for “talking *about* how the comic functions.”¹⁹ This is not to say that there are no amusing sections or examples of the comic in *Postscript*, for there are many, but their use is often ordered to the explanation or elucidation of whatever Climacus is discussing in relation to the comic. Just as one can understand the two parts of Kierkegaard’s dissertation to be addressing the phenomenon of irony in history and the concept of irony, respectively,²⁰ Kierkegaard, ever vigilant to ensure that objective reflection does not confuse the categories of existence, is always careful to distinguish a thing from a human conception of the thing.

conception of the comedy of the Christian gospel rests upon an undialectical account, I will argue that Kierkegaard’s understanding of the comic not only permits but requires a dialectical conception of reality, here described in the language of “contradiction.” For Kierkegaard, though, dialectic is not in opposition to the Christian gospel since the comic dialectic (i.e., contradiction between norms, inner vs. outer, finite vs. infinite, etc.) is essential to the Christian gospel’s being appropriated by existing human beings. In Kierkegaard’s view, situated as he is in an environment saturated by Hegelianism, it is a denial of this dialectic that threatens the gospel, not the reverse, as will be made clear below.

I will add that, though there certainly are differences in Wood’s Barthian account from Kierkegaard’s, I am not convinced that the disagreement over whether the comic is dialectical or not is, in the end, a fundamental incompatibility. It may be that the disagreement is primarily a definitional one, such as, for example, whether it is the contradiction with a way out or the happy eschatological resolution that best deserves to be called “the comic.” An association of the comic with eschatological resolution would naturally be less inclined to see it as dialectical, but Kierkegaard’s focus on the contradictions of a presently existing Christian cannot understand the comic apart from its dialectic.

¹⁷ Lippitt (2000), 3; Walsh, 6-7; Masaru Otani, “The Comical,” in *Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana vol. 3: Concepts and Alternatives in Kierkegaard*, ed. Marie Mikulová Thulstrup (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Boghandel, 1980), 230.

¹⁸ Burgess, 89.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁰ Fr.-Eb. Wilde, “Concept,” in *Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana vol. 3: Concepts and Alternatives in Kierkegaard*, ed. Marie Mikulová Thulstrup (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Boghandel, 1980), 20.

Consequently, one observes Kierkegaard's regular practice of placing "the concept of" before various nouns, such as *The Concept of Irony* and *The Concept of Anxiety*.²¹ Such word care is Kierkegaard's way of engaging in philosophical and theological reflection without confusing that reflection with appropriating and existing in the virtue or vice under discussion. If one were to pick up a book titled *Anxiety*, one might become reflectively and objectively confused that anxiety itself is found therein, while in fact one will only find inside a theoretical account and conception of anxiety, which is entirely different from experiencing anxiety oneself. Kierkegaard's title helps to prevent the confusion. Similarly, to discuss the concept of guilt is different from being guilty, and so a discussion of the concept of the comic, as many readers of humor theory should know, should not necessarily be expected to be amusing.²²

Consequently, my own discussion of the comic in Kierkegaard follows his lead in maintaining interest in the concept, including such matters as the nature and structure of the comic as well as how it functions for shaping existing individuals (all aimed at the potential appropriation by the reader, which of course a written treatise cannot accomplish on its own).

This chapter, then, is to be understood as an attempt to draw out and clarify Kierkegaard's understanding of the nature of the comic, as presented by his pseudonym Johannes Climacus. The first task is to present key points of his argument with clarity.

²¹ Ibid., 25-26.

²² See Burgess 113. The point stands, but one complication is that Kierkegaard likes to use pseudonyms who seem to embody existentially the very ideas they are addressing, as a subtle critique of the Hegelian philosophers who believed they could competently speak objectively about subjective matters. Kierkegaard's pseudonym, in his discussion of a concept, not infrequently models to the reader something of what it means to appropriate that concept existentially. It is the same with Climacus' discussion of the comic, since Climacus is himself not a stolid lecturer of philosophy but a humorist.

Also required, though, is the dangerous activity of positing ideas and assumptions that are either not explicitly in the text or only briefly glossed there, which of course risks—but seeks to avoid—the misattribution of foreign ideas to the author. In this perilous task, I am reassured by the example of Climacus himself who, in the *Postscript*, addresses theses that Lessing possibly or actually held. In other words, the theses are plausibly in the spirit of Lessing, if not always in the letter.²³ It may satisfy the reader of my argument at points to insert Climacus’ own cautioning words mentally into my text: “...at least his procedure can be explained this way, and perhaps the explanation is correct, perhaps.”²⁴

The Comic in Relation to Irony and Humor

To begin with, while contemporary modern usage tends to use “humor” to describe the broad category amusement, Kierkegaard uses “the comic” as his umbrella term, with “irony” and “humor” being two technical subtypes of the comic.²⁵ This means that any claims made about the nature of the comic in general apply to all forms of the comic, including irony and humor more specifically. While this paper shows some interest in irony, humor, and other comic forms, it is the fundamental structure of the comic itself that draws the most focus and not the various forms that the comic takes.

²³ “Possible and Actual Theses by Lessing” (SKS 7, 72 / CUP 1, 72). “I now intend to present something that I shall, what the deuce, ascribe to Lessing, without being certain that he would acknowledge it” (SKS 7, 73 / CUP 1, 72).

²⁴ SKS 7, 92 / CUP 1, 93. Indeed, Climacus gives one all too much justification for this tack, noting that when one understands a thinker, whether the thinker “*actually* has understood this in such a way” as explicated “is a matter of complete indifference” (SKS 7, 296-97 / CUP 1, 325). While strictly true when it comes to the validity of an idea, in a dissertation that makes pains to draw out the thought of a certain figure the process will not be handled quite so cavalierly.

²⁵ Lippitt (2000), 63.

To be even more specific, irony and humor are existential expressions of the comic. That is, irony and humor are descriptions of what human existence becomes when the comic inhabits one's personality in certain ways. Irony²⁶ and humor²⁷ are both described as being existential categories, rather than, say, aesthetic ones,²⁸ and they are both given positions among the spheres or stages of existence,²⁹ about which more will be said later. The comic, however, is not limited to occupying a single position among the stages of existence,³⁰ and irony and humor are both existential expressions that by definition contain the comic.³¹

The Comic as Contradiction

What, then, is the comic itself? Climacus defines the comic, saying, "The tragic and the comic are the same inasmuch as both are contradiction, but *the tragic is suffering contradiction, and the comic is painless contradiction.*"³² For the moment, let us forestall the analysis of what makes a contradiction a suffering or a painless one in order to consider what is meant by "contradiction." When Climacus says that the comic is a

²⁶ E.g., *SKS* 7, 457 / *CUP* 1, 503-4 and *SKS* 7, 473.1 / *CUP* 1, 521n.

²⁷ *SKS* 7, 265 / *CUP* 1, 291.

²⁸ *Fear and Trembling* even characterizes irony and humor as "passions" (*SKS* 4, 145 / *FT*, 51).

²⁹ *SKS* 7, 455 / *CUP* 1, 501-2.

³⁰ *SKS* 7, 465 / *CUP* 1, 513-14.

³¹ *SKS* 7, 473-74 / *CUP* 1, 521.

³² *SKS* 7, 465-66 / *CUP* 1, 514. Cf. *JJ*:9 / *JP* 2, 1737. It may be that Kierkegaard's essential insight into the nature of the comic as contradiction was inspired by the contrastive style, or *Stilbruch*, of J. G. Hamann's sense of humor: "...Hamann's oracular utterances 'from on high,' as it were, tend to go hand in hand with a notorious, and down-to-earth sense of humor. Indeed, what makes Hamann's style more original still is his tendency to bathos, i.e., his tendency precisely at the most sublime moments of his texts to indulge in the comical, the trivial, the fatuous, or even the obscene, thereby effecting an intentional 'break of style' or *Stilbruch*" (John R. Betz, *After Enlightenment: The Post-Secular Vision of J. G. Hamann* [Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009], 11).

contradiction, he does not mean that the comic is a formal, logical contradiction, since, as Westphal says, there is nothing especially funny about simultaneously asserting p and not- p .³³ Rather, by “contradiction” Climacus means something akin to a misrelation or incongruity. Consider his following example of the comic: “If someone were to say, ‘I venture to stake my life on there being at least four and a half shillings’ worth of gold in the binding of this book,’ that would be comic. The contradiction is between the highest pathos (to stake his life) and the object....”³⁴ The height and seriousness of staking one’s life is in misrelation to the triviality of the matter of how much gold is in the binding of a book. Even if one were confident in the amount of gold in the binding, what profit is there in staking one’s life on the matter? This is not a logical contradiction but an ethical

³³ Merold Westphal, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1996), 165-66. See also Burgess, 116; C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard’s “Fragments” and “Postscript”: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 1999), 188; Robert L. Perkins, “The Categories of Humor and Philosophy,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 1, eds. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein (1976): 105. Evans does well to note that, since “contradiction” does not mean a formal logical contradiction but, rather, an incongruity, this should give pause to those who think that, by calling the incarnation a contradiction, Climacus and Kierkegaard mean to characterize it as a logical contradiction (C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* [Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2006], 83).

In qualification of Westphal, however, it should be noted that even a logical contradiction might have comic potential. For example, a particularly pompous philosopher who, unknowingly, contradicts himself by asserting p and not- p in the course of giving a paper might win some sardonic smirks or comic mockery from attentive audience members. Moreover, nonsense has a long history as a source of amusement, as attested by the popularity of the writings of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. Consider the following vignette by the Danish pianist and comic Victor Borge, where a logical contradiction is a source of comic amusement. Speaking of his childhood, Borge says that his father came to him one day and asked him, “Borge, how old are you?” “Seven.” At this, his father roared, “Shame on you, Borge! When I was your age, I was twelve!”

In both the philosopher and the Victor Borge examples, though, it is probably not precisely the logical contradiction that is the object of one’s laughter but the subjectivity. We laugh most specifically at the person who appears incongruous in his lack of awareness that what he says is a logical contradiction.

³⁴ *SKS* 7, 466.1 / *CUP* 1, 514n.

one. The misrelation is the lifeblood of the comic, and the comic cannot be found if no contradiction is present.³⁵

The Comic as a Contradiction of a Norm

The comic, then, is found in contradiction, but it is worth considering this contradiction more closely. What is it precisely that is being contradicted? For Climacus it is not exactly contradiction as such that is necessary for the comic but the contradiction of a norm or an expectation.³⁶ For the comic to be present, there must be a norm subverted, not just any conflict among roughly equally-balanced forces. For example, a floor pattern of black-and-white tiles is not necessarily comic although the misrelation between the colors of black and white is present. However, a vast ballroom covered entirely in black tiles save only a single small white tile near the middle has something of the comic about it. The sheer audacity of the little white tile to sit there gleaming amidst an otherwise solid-black floor could surprise and perhaps amuse observant dancers.³⁷

The white tile is striking only because it subverts the “norm” for the floor, which is black.

The same tile in a white ballroom floor, though, would be ignored entirely.³⁸

³⁵ *SKS* 7, 322 / *CUP* 1, 353; *SKS* 7, 384 / *CUP* 1, 422; *SKS* 7, 453 / *CUP* 1, 499-500. Cf. *Pap.* V B 60 137 / *CA*, 207. Climacus uses the fact that the comic is always based in contradiction as evidence that the comic cannot be the highest existentially since the highest would lack the requisite contradiction (*SKS* 7, 420 / *CUP* 1, 462).

³⁶ “In all these examples there is a ‘contradiction,’ but what is contradicted is our normal expectation as to what goes with what, and what follows what. The patterns of our experience are disrupted and the result is experienced as incongruous” (Evans [2006], 83).

³⁷ Some, such as the building management, could experience this as annoying rather than amusing, but these observers, feeling pain, are taking the contradiction in the direction of the tragic rather than the comic. See discussion below.

³⁸ One thinks also of the iconic image of the white-faced clown with a bright red nose. The figure of the clown has become so familiar that some might forget that the color difference is supposed to be jarring and comic, but on reflection the contradiction is clearer. Blanching out the skin of the face brings the vividness of the red nose into greater relief, heightening the comic appearance.

Climacus presents an example of the comic that presumes the importance of the norm when he says, “Something that is not intrinsically ludicrous can by way of contradiction evoke laughter. Thus if a man ordinarily goes around oddly dressed and then finally shows up properly dressed for once, we laugh at this because we recollect the other.”³⁹ What is comic about a properly dressed man? Nothing at all—unless one is judged by the norm of dressing oddly. Again, it is the subversion of the norm that draws out the amusement, and the norm could, theoretically, lie on either side of this divide. Indeed, to say that one is “properly” dressed assumes the norm of how one *ought* to dress or *usually* dresses in certain circumstances. The more common comical form of Climacus’ observation would be a man who “dresses down” or dresses too informally when attending a formal event where dress expectations are higher. Wearing a Hawaiian shirt and flip-flops to, say, a legal trial where one is the defense attorney has a comical aspect.⁴⁰ In Climacus’ version, though, society comes to make an exception for the man who usually dresses oddly, assuming a new norm for him of a peculiar style of dress. When he shows up properly dressed for once, we laugh at it only, as Climacus says, “because we recollect the other.” The recollection of a previous norm is the context against which the man’s being properly dressed presents itself as a comic contradiction.⁴¹

³⁹ *SKS* 7, 468.1 / *CUP* 1, 516n.

⁴⁰ This presumes there is a “way out.” If the defendant is convicted partly due to impressions of incompetence that his attorney’s dress evokes, this contradiction would turn tragic. More about the way out will be said later.

⁴¹ That the comic requires the establishment of a norm which is then subverted or contradicted is the reason comedy so often comes in threes. Consider how many jokes begin with something akin to “A priest, a rabbi, and a minister walk into a bar....” Three is an essential number for comedy because a norm is required. The first two iterations establish a norm, and then the third, contrary to expectations generated by the established norm, subverts it. To put this in geometrical terms, it takes two points to plot a line. Once the line or trajectory is clear to the auditor, the comedian is able to contradict the line with the third point. The third point is not felt as a contradiction, giving rise to the comic, unless a norm is already understood.

Roberts rightly argues for the essential role that norms play for the comic, saying, “A sense for the normal is basic to any sense of humor. You won’t find anything funny if you don’t consider anything to be normal, and this sense for the normal is what constitutes a person’s perspective.”⁴²

Arguing that one must find something “normal” in order to have a sense of humor is akin to saying that the comic needs “rootedness,” as Lippitt puts it,⁴³ in a certain position or perspective. Note Climacus’ language of “basis” in the following quotation:

If someone, for example, wanted to make everything comic without any basis, one would see at once that his comic effect is irrelevant, because it lacks a basis in any sphere, and the inventor himself would be made comic from the viewpoint of the ethical sphere, because he himself as an existing person must have his basis in existence in one way or another.⁴⁴

The comic requires basis or grounding, according to Climacus, and this basis has a further connection to existential concerns such as the spheres of existence. What this means is that, though the comic has a reputation for being a wildcard or even untamable, it is not necessarily an unqualified force for chaos or randomness. While, through the contradiction, some norm must be subverted when the comic is operative, this norm must

The following joke by Jon Lajoie illustrates the principle: “John Lennon imagined a world filled with peace and love. Martin Luther King dreamt of a world free from racial discrimination and oppression. The guy who invented the Frisbee dreamt of a world where people would throw a flat, circular object at each other in order to pass the time. He succeeded.” The triviality—and success—of the guy who invented the Frisbee is placed in comic contradiction with the high-minded pattern established by the examples of Lennon and King. In this context, what would otherwise be a bland fact is turned into a comical observation through its contradiction of an established narrative norm.

⁴² Robert C. Roberts, “Sense of Humor as a Christian Virtue,” *Faith and Philosophy* 7.2 (April 1990): 181.

⁴³ Lippitt (2000), 148. “Moreover, if a use of irony is ever to escape Kierkegaard’s powerful charge against what I shall call ‘total’ irony—that it is ‘infinite absolute negativity’—it is important that the ironist has a *position*” (Ibid., 136).

⁴⁴ *SKS* 7, 469-71 / *CUP* 1, 517-18. Climacus also says, “The ironist levels everything on the basis of abstract humanity; the humorist on the basis of the abstract relationship with God” (*SKS* 7, 408.1 / *CUP* 1, 448n) and “The basis of the comic is the underlying total guilt that sustains this whole comedy” (*SKS* 7, 504 / *CUP* 1, 554).

be subverted from some other *position*, which may turn out to be a new norm supplanting the old. The comic appears to function like a kind of fulcrum, which dislodges but only by putting down weight in a new place. Being located in the perspective of a new norm, even if only tentatively or temporarily, gives the comic critique direction and the relevant degree of focus required for its subversive task. Lippitt makes a similar point when he argues that just because an author uses irony and humor in his writing, it is not necessarily true that what he says inevitably “descends into undecidability.”⁴⁵ He uses Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” to illustrate that an essay’s use of irony and humor does not thereby render radically undecidable what an author might believe and even passionately advocate.⁴⁶ Even a comic performance steeped in absurdity does not preclude the fact that it may come from a place of very serious commitment. Climacus voices agreement with the point when he remarks, “But the presence of irony does not necessarily mean that the earnestness is excluded. Only assistant professors assume that.”⁴⁷

Earnestness and Jest

Let us turn to a discussion of this “earnestness” and what relation it may have to jest. We have seen that the structure of the comic requires a functioning norm for the clashing contradiction to become apparent, and that norm, which functions as a deeper basis for the comic, can be described as “earnestness.”⁴⁸ While, *prima facie*, earnestness

⁴⁵ Lippitt (2000), 136.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 149-57.

⁴⁷ *SKS* 7, 253.1 / *CUP* 1, 277n.

⁴⁸ For an extended reflection on earnestness, see *SKS* 4, 446-451 / *CA*, 146-51. Vigilius Haufniensis shows reluctance to define earnestness with precision “because in relation to existential

appears to be the opposite of jest, Climacus regularly links the two concepts very closely. For example, he offers up the opinion of Cato Uticensis that there is a “dialectical reciprocity” between jest and earnestness, such that “it would be impossible to understand earnestness if one does not understand jest.”⁴⁹ Also, he says of Socrates, “What Socrates said about the passage across the water sounds simply like a jest, and yet it was the highest earnestness.... [Such a speaker], while jesting with someone, may be in the presence of the god.”⁵⁰ Climacus does not see it as being in any way incoherent for very lighthearted jesting to come from a place of deep earnestness, even such an earnestness as a private encounter with the god.⁵¹

Earnestness is not to be “balanced” against jest. How is it possible for earnestness to be so deeply related to jest, its presumed contrary? Some commentators have suggested that earnestness and jest are paired so closely together in Climacus’ writings because one is supposed to balance both elements in one’s life, with each keeping the other from getting out of hand. For example, Lippitt says that Climacus

concepts it always indicates a greater discretion to abstain from definitions” (SKS 4, 447 / CA, 147). Nevertheless, he does suggest that if disposition is the combination of feeling with the clarity of cognition, then earnestness is the originality of disposition “preserved in the responsibility of freedom” (SKS 4, 448 / CA, 149). This earnest preservation of the originality of disposition leads to repetition. In order to simplify matters for my argument, I will consider earnestness to be an expression of personality, involving cognition, that passionately preserves the immediacy of feeling across time. When I speak of one’s earnestness “about a norm,” this indicates the presence of both passion and cognition in sustaining across time the belief, perspective, worldview, sense of normalcy, etc. to which the norm in question refers. If one quickly attempts to abandon such earnestness in order to be a moving target while inconsistently engaging in the comic, this shows that one’s earnestness is lacking, and that one’s comic power is weak or degenerating.

⁴⁹ SKS 7, 72 / CUP 1, 70-71.

⁵⁰ SKS 7, 87 / CUP 1, 87-8.

⁵¹ “[F]or while the statement in jest perhaps weaves its way drolly into the rest of the conversation, the speaker may privately have a tryst with the god...” (SKS 7, 86 / CUP 1, 87).

believes “that the comic and pathos, jest and earnest, must be *in balance*.”⁵² It is the true comic, he says, that finds the right balance between these contrary elements.⁵³ But Climacus does not speak of the balance of jest and earnestness in this way, at least if what is meant by “balance” is to set them in a zero-sum opposition, such that to accentuate more of the one is to accentuate less of the other. Climacus does not conceive of jest and earnestness as opposing elements to be balanced so that one must jest half of the time but be earnest the other half, as if one may jest on Monday just as long as one is earnest again on Tuesday, ensuring that the two elements are evenly distributed amongst one’s time.⁵⁴ Nor is Climacus here concerned to balance jest and earnestness like a mother cautioning her child not to play too wildly or roughly, as if one’s jesting is in danger of going overboard, so that one must combat that tendency by applying some earnestness again to counteract the jesting spirit. Very oddly, as seen in the Socrates example, jest and earnestness are conceived by Kierkegaard as existing at the same time and in the same

⁵² Lippitt (2000), 124.

⁵³ Ibid., 125, 174. Barrett says, “Because of this need to respect tragic suffering, the true practitioner of comedy must delicately balance earnestness and jest” (Lee Barrett, “The Uses and Misuses of the Comic: Reflections on the *Corsair* Affair,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Corsair Affair*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990), 128). Roberts puts the idea in relation to the Christian atonement, which he says “holds out the possibility for a human life to be a synthesis of the deepest seriousness and the lightest touch. The seriousness and the jest are mutually supportive” (Robert C. Roberts, “Smiling with God: Reflections on Christianity and the Psychology of Humor,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 4.2 (April 1987): 173).

⁵⁴ “That the subjective existing thinker is just as positive as negative can also be expressed by saying that he has just as much of the comic as of pathos. According to the way people exist ordinarily, pathos and the comic are apportioned in such a way that one has the one, another the other, one a little more of the one, another a little less. But for the person existing in double-reflection, the proportion is this: just as much of pathos, just as much of the comic. The proportion provides an interdependent safeguard. The pathos that is not safeguarded by the comic is an illusion; the comic that is not safeguarded by pathos is immaturity. Only he who himself produces this will understand it, otherwise not” (*SKS* 7, 87 / *CUP* 1, 87). Cf. *SKS* 6, 340 / *SLW*, 366. I understand Climacus to mean “passion for a matter of earnestness” when he speaks of “pathos.”

actions. It is *while* jesting with someone that the jester may be in the presence of the god.⁵⁵

Earnestness is the ground of the Comic. The reason this is possible is because comic jesting “has a deeper basis” than may at first be evident, and the basis may be ethical or even religious earnestness.⁵⁶ As the presence of irony does not necessarily mean that earnestness is excluded, a jesting remark need not imply that the remark is only a jest.⁵⁷ So even the ethical and religious practice of taking life with “extreme heaviness”⁵⁸ is not seen by Climacus as ruling out the possibility for the comic. Indeed, far from ruling the comic out, such earnestness makes the comic possible because Climacus understands a deep earnestness to be the *ground* of the comic. It is by having this earnest norm or commitment of some kind that allows the comic jest subsequently to appear: “[T]rue earnestness itself invents the comic.”⁵⁹ Climacus associates this earnestness with one’s subjective inwardness, which is another tie between the comic and moral upbuilding, though more will be said about this later.⁶⁰ In other words, one must hold to a norm with some degree of earnestness before the comic can appear, and the

⁵⁵ SKS 7, 87 / CUP 1, 87-8. In the context of the reference to Socrates, “the god” refers to pagan religion or, perhaps, to a generically “religious” conception of divinity. In *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard repeatedly puts this phrase in the mouth of Johannes Climacus (E.g., SKS 4, 219 / PF, 10. See PF, 278n13) to support his character who claims not to be a Christian, even as his arguments clarify the distinctions between Christianity and the Socratic perspective. For Kierkegaard himself, though, to speak of “the god” is an indirect, oblique, and probably comical way of indicating something about Christianity. When God becomes present to one, matters of one’s earnest commitments come to the fore.

⁵⁶ SKS 7, 66 / CUP 1, 64.

⁵⁷ SKS 7, 101 / CUP 1, 104.

⁵⁸ SKS 7, 242 / CUP 1, 266.

⁵⁹ SKS 6, 340 / SLW, 366.

⁶⁰ “The earnestness is his own inner life; the jest is that it pleases God to attach this importance to his striving” (SKS 7, 130 / CUP 1, 139).

more one holds to the norm in earnest strength, the more powerful the contrast that results and the stronger the comic result.⁶¹ Climacus thinks it is “rubbish” to pit the comic and earnestness against one another in order to “annihilate earnestness by means of the comic and the comic by means of earnestness.”⁶² True earnestness is no enemy of the comic as such but is a means of fostering it.

A clarification: earnestness vs. obtuse earnestness. Indeed, true earnestness is so little the enemy of the comic that it can even be said to be composed by jest,⁶³ while it is a lesser earnestness, scarcely worthy of the name, which seeks to eradicate the comic as a necessary enemy. Let us here attempt to forestall confusion with a brief discursus on Kierkegaard’s technical language regarding “earnestness.” It might reasonably be asked

⁶¹ Consider an illustration from playwright David Mamet. He has said that drama is like a joke, since in both one builds up expectations in order to dash them and then fulfill them in a way that one never sees coming. His favorite joke, he says, is as follows:

Q: What did Custer say when he saw the Indians coming?

A: “Here come the Indians.”

The amusement of the joke relies on the building up of an expectation to learn an interesting fact from history and perhaps even to gain some wisdom from it for living. This is comically contradicted by the answer, which, even if true, is so trivial as to be hardly worth knowing. The question seems to promise an answer and then delivers one only by the most technical of standards. To describe it in Kierkegaard’s language, the joke is effective to the degree that the interlocutor is genuinely incited with an earnest curiosity to know the answer, perhaps out of a personal interest for self-edification. It is because there is an earnest desire to gain from the answer that the actual answer is deflating and surprising. (This could be experienced as frustrating if the interlocutor were so desperate to know what Custer said that he becomes unable to laugh at the surprising answer. Thus, more than earnestness alone is required for the comic). One, however, who is utterly bored or uninterested with the initial question, lacking the requisite earnestness to invest himself, will be the least likely to perceive the joke as genuinely comical. He may even despise the putative jokester for so pathetically wasting his time.

⁶² *SKS* 7, 475 / *CUP* 1, 523. In Kierkegaard, “jest” has a sense of “frivolity,” “light playfulness,” “silliness,” and occasionally he uses the term to be dismissive, as when Haufniensis describes the attempt to capture existential concepts in the language of abstraction as a jest (*SKS* 4, 447 / *CA*, 147). The tone of jest’s frivolity is, then, contrasted with earnestness’ tone of dedicated passion. The comic contradiction with a way out, though, combines earnestness and jest together. Therefore, as in Climacus’ example, to oppose the comic and earnestness to one another is to engage in self-destructive warfare, not realizing how much one’s attack depends upon the survival of the enemy that one is fighting.

⁶³ “[E]ven *earnestness* is a compound of jest and earnestness” (*SKS* 7, 264 / *CUP* 1, 290).

what it means to say that earnestness can be the ground of the comic, as has been heretofore argued, as well as being something that is composed by jest. The answer is that Kierkegaard uses the same word, “earnestness,” to name two different phenomena: true earnestness and one of the components of true earnestness.⁶⁴ A true and proper earnestness takes matters, like ethics and religion, with an appropriate seriousness, and this earnestness is to be rightly combined with jest since human efforts, even in these arenas for earnestness, are always subject to limitation and failure.⁶⁵ Life is caught in the dialectic of both treating serious matters with the earnestness they deserve and, for precisely the same matters, seeing the jest of one’s earnest acting in light of the infinite requirements that grasp us yet cannot be utterly satisfied by us. It is true earnestness to feed a hungry man in earnest service while simultaneously seeing that one’s actions are a trifling jest, since one cannot thereby end all of world hunger or even satisfy all of this one man’s future need for food, let alone his other manifold needs, be they financial, medical, relational, spiritual, etc. The same action is both earnest ethical service to one’s fellow man and a trivial jest since no finite act can satisfy infinity. This duplex reality is especially true when viewed in relation to God, heightening both one’s earnestness about

⁶⁴ Ibid. “Earnestness is basically not something simple, a simplex, but is a *compositum* [compound], for true earnestness is the unity of jest and earnestness. I am best convinced of that by considering Socrates” (*SKS* 6, 339 / *SLW* 365).

⁶⁵ “The term *jest* is used by Kierkegaard primarily to characterize a relationship in existence. He wants to emphasize that all human efforts must be regarded as a jest in relation to the infinite ethical requirement which confronts man; man is saved by grace alone (see *X² A 203*). But although all human striving appears as a jest in relation to the high requirement, man is in no sense released from striving” (*JP* 2, p. 605).

the task and one's sense of its jesting levity. It is "true earnestness" to see both sides of this reality, without sacrificing one to the other in a shabby attempt at mediation.⁶⁶

Now, instead of considering the dialectical "true earnestness" with its compound nature, one should consider the element of earnestness in isolation from its dialectical counterpart of jest, which together compose that "true earnestness." In isolation, the pure component of earnestness, permitting no jest, looks very different. Kierkegaard refers to this earnestness in isolation as "relative earnestness"⁶⁷ or, more frequently, "obtuse earnestness." The fault of this obtuse earnestness is not in taking something seriously but, for example, in taking some partial matter too seriously at the expense of the whole or in taking some finite concern as if it were the absolute concern. It is too worldly and fails to see how trivial the matter appears from God's perspective. That is, obtuse earnestness is improperly earnest with relation to extent and/or degree. Obtuse earnestness is "really narrow-mindedness"⁶⁸ that reflects self-importance⁶⁹ and leads one into "the most lamentable of all tyrannies: the tyranny of sullenness and obtuseness and rigidity."⁷⁰ Kierkegaard considers this "obtuse" or "so-called earnestness" to be the easiest of all attitudes since it relaxes the tension between jest and earnestness by eliminating jest, but this only makes the supposedly earnest individual "stupid and

⁶⁶ "But earnestness is not mediation.... What earnestness wills in earnest it does not regard as comic insofar as it itself wills it, but for that reason it can readily see the comic therein. In this way the comic purifies the pathos-filled emotions, and conversely the pathos-filled emotions give substance to the comic" (*SKS* 6, 340 / *SLW*, 366). Cf. *SKS* 7, 428 / *CUP* 1, 471-72.

⁶⁷ *Pap.* V B 118:5 / *SLW*, 611. I will be referring to this obtuse earnestness infrequently in the remainder of my dissertation. To avoid confusion, I will refer to it as "obtuse earnestness" when I do so.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *SKS* 7, 428 / *CUP* 1, 472.

⁷⁰ *SKS* 7, 257 / *CUP* 1, 282.

comical.”⁷¹ Thus, it is possible for someone to be earnest in a way that prevents her from understanding jest, which, consequently, means that she has also misunderstood true earnestness, since that necessarily includes jesting in the right places.⁷²

It is not a “safe” position to seek to avoid the danger of laughing at the wrong things by seeking never to laugh at all. There is no safety to be had in such obtuse earnestness, since “it is just as questionable, precisely just as questionable, to be pathos-filled and earnest in the wrong place as it is to laugh in the wrong place.”⁷³ It is incorrect to think that it is necessarily a good thing to be earnest, as if earnestness were “something to be taken without prescription,”⁷⁴ since one may be mistaken both as to what should be taken in earnest and how. Neither earnestness nor jest are to be taken as cure-alls to be universally applied; rather, one cannot avoid the difficulty of living as an existing human being where both earnestness and jest are required in their respective times and in their respective ways, which means that one can never altogether escape the risk of having used earnestness or jest in the wrong places.

This is the context within which Climacus should be understood when he asks merely “to be known for being the only one who in our *earnest* times was not earnest.”⁷⁵ Climacus is not arguing against the true earnestness that elsewhere he advocates with

⁷¹ JJ:292 / JP 2, 1743. That is, he is “comical” not because he is intentionally funny, of course, but because he, lacking a sense of humor when it is called for, appears ludicrously serious. He is the object of others’ laughter.

⁷² SKS 7, 72 / CUP 1, 70-71.

⁷³ SKS 7, 477 / CUP 1, 525.

⁷⁴ Ibid. As Climacus says, “Many a man believes he is earnest because he has a wife and children and burdensome business affairs. But this does not necessarily mean that he has religious earnestness; his earnestness might also be perverseness and ill humor” (SKS 7, 449 / CUP 1, 495).

⁷⁵ SKS 7, 257 / CUP 1, 282. Cf. SKS 7, 101.1 / CUP 1, 103n.

such energy, nor is he advocating that all earnestness be lost in a deluge of intoxicated laughter. Climacus asks to be known as one who was not *obtusely* earnest in an obtusely earnest age. Instead, Climacus wants to make space for jest, without which true earnestness—indeed, true religious earnestness—would not be possible. Although Climacus, the humorist,⁷⁶ sometimes speaks ironically as if he were the enemy of earnestness as such, he is not, and it is not difficult to find passages in his writings where he shows his hand as to some positions he holds in earnest, such as his opposition to Hegelian mediation. He then shows his earnest opposition to Hegelian mediation precisely by laughing at it. It is apparent that Climacus is earnest at least in his desire to be known as a vigilante for humor who has escaped the obtuse earnestness of his age. He is serious about the comic, which to Kierkegaard is no contradictory position.

I will add a final clarification about obtuse earnestness. Earnestness can be abstractly considered to be distinct from jest, as speaking of true earnestness as a compound of “jest and earnestness” indicates.⁷⁷ Existentially, however, when one attempts to appropriate earnestness alone, without its dialectical counterpart jest, such earnestness evidences itself as “obtuse earnestness.” One then appears comic because one lacks the human subjectivity to have a sense of humor when it is called for. This

⁷⁶ Because Climacus is a humorist and engages in the jesting of revocation, some scholars conclude that nothing in *Postscript* can be taken seriously and that it may perhaps be simple nonsense (E.g., James Conant, “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense,” in *Pursuits of Reason*, eds. Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam [Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1993]: 195-224. Cf. Evans [2006], 69). This is to operate under a mistaken understanding of humor as the enemy of earnestness, but the presence of either humor or irony in Kierkegaard’s writing does not mean that earnestness is excluded. Climacus is indeed a humorist and not a Christian, but this does not undercut his earnestness about clarifying categories of existence in order to distinguish humor from faith while also teaching their proximity. Indeed, the humorist Climacus might even be seeking the Christian faith: “No one can know this better than I, who am myself essentially a humorist and, having my life in immanence, am seeking the Christian-religious” (*SKS* 7, 410 / *CUP* 1, 451). Cf. *SKS* 7, 438 / *CUP* 1, 483 and *SKS* 7, 454 / *CUP* 1, 501.

⁷⁷ *SKS* 6, 339 / *SLW* 365; *SKS* 7, 264 / *CUP* 1, 290.

“obtuse earnestness” may itself be a very admirable earnestness when lived in the proper relation with jest under the infinite ethical demand and in proper relation to God, but isolated from jest it is only foolish obtuseness. A right earnestness wrongly appropriated becomes an obtuse earnestness.

One sees again the close connection between getting jest right and having a right relationship with God. It is, Climacus says, a contradiction for a religious individual to be obtusely earnest,⁷⁸ since it is precisely religious earnestness that is true earnestness, appropriately combining jest and earnestness.⁷⁹ While some would accuse Christians of having no sense of humor,⁸⁰ Kierkegaard sees it as so integral to Christian identity that they have access to the comic that he considers it a contradiction for them to lack it. Nevertheless, the properly religious sense of humor is one that is grounded in earnestness, and this earnestness is not contrary to the comic but foundational for it.

Comic Play Does Not Necessarily Forfeit the Earnestness of Its Norms

Returning to the argument concerning norms as the ground of the comic, one must ask whether it is really true that one must fully own or adopt a norm in order to use the

⁷⁸ SKS 7, 474 / CUP 1, 522.

⁷⁹ “True earnestness” is also referred to as “religious earnestness,” (E.g., SKS 7, 428 / CUP 1, 472; SKS 7, 449 / CUP 1, 495) because Kierkegaard believes that a conception of God is required for true earnestness since a) sufficient earnestness requires the weight and gravity of divine mandate and b) without a reference to God, earthly matters become absolutized as all-too-serious to be relativized and treated as the jests they truly are. Without God, earthly matters become both too light and too heavy. With God, though, this world and its concerns are prevented from being considered to be of no importance, since this world is both created and loved by God, and from being considered to be of absolute importance, since this world exists contingently under the consent of a divine source who warns us away from its manifold idolatries.

⁸⁰ E.g., John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 125-26. Morreall argues that someone with a sense of humor “will live with the awareness that nothing is important in an absolute way,” which a Christian is unable to do (Ibid., 125). His view of comic perception is strikingly opposed to Kierkegaard’s, for whom belief in the absolute importance of God is precisely the norm that gives rise to the greatest perception of the comic. As Evans says, “Kierkegaard agrees with Morreall that the Christian life is a life of earnestness, but he rejects the claim that this earnestness precludes humor” (Evans [2006], 86).

comic. Is it not the case that to have a sense of humor is to engage in play? Is it not, then, the mistake of a dullard to take the comic seriously in its joking? True, it is a mistake to take the comic seriously *in the wrong way*, but this is not equivalent to saying that the comic takes nothing in earnest whatsoever.

Roberts argues that one is capable of a variety of psychological relationships towards the perspective offered in examples of humor and argues that, for example, one may adopt the Christian perspective humorously without “owning” it.⁸¹ Considering the example of a sexist joke, Roberts posits that it is possible for one to entertain sexist propositions for the purposes of appreciating a joke without endorsing them and so being a sexist oneself.⁸² One who does this “is not a sexist, but occasionally takes what William James calls a ‘moral holiday’ and enjoys presenting himself (to himself and others) *as* a sexist.”⁸³ It is true that people are quite capable of entering into a perspective for a time that they would not completely affirm in their own life, and this trying on of an alternate role can be done *via* the comic. This point, however, does not mean that absolutely nothing of moral import is going on by entertaining various forms of the comic. The “moral holiday” cannot be absolute—for even the frivolity of holidays depends upon the earnest stability of the 9 to 5 job for its funding and scheduling.⁸⁴ It is true that, following Roberts’ advice, one should not “underestimate the plasticity of the

⁸¹ Roberts (1990), 182-83.

⁸² Roberts (1988), 135.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ I daresay that Kierkegaard would deny that there are any true moral holidays. Even the decision of whether or not to take a “moral holiday” is itself a moral act. The gift and task of existence cannot be avoided through simple abnegation.

human mind for adopting attitudes in the experimental mode.”⁸⁵ There is a converse warning, however. One also should not underestimate the power of the comic to persuade by establishing the human mind more firmly in norms that it otherwise would not adopt *via* more direct means. Social pressures and the enticement of comic laughter have the ability to wear down ethical resistance to laughing at an inappropriate matter. Especially if one is not completely conscious of what norms are operating behind an instance of the comic, to give oneself over to it is to submit to its normative influence. Indeed Roberts tacitly admits of this possibility when he says that one who entertains the sexist propositions of a joke might find himself “sliding into serious sexism,” though at this point this non-sexist would become alarmed and cease to enjoy the joke.⁸⁶ There is another possibility, though. It might be that the non-sexist acquires a taste for the sexist humor and allows himself to become persuaded⁸⁷ through the indirect means of the comic into holding the norms of a more earnest sexism. In time, he might simply become a sexist.

To see this, one need not abandon the idea that the comic is a type of play that enables one to adopt attitudes in the experimental mode. Even play has a serious element, since play is also training and habituation. Young animals in the wild constantly wrestle with their siblings in play, but this play trains them for important life skills such as eventually killing prey or fighting off rival mates. A child at play is also “trying on” more earnest tasks that she may more deeply appropriate as an adult. Perhaps little Billy

⁸⁵ Ibid., 136.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ By “persuasion,” I do not, of course, mean convincing through rational deliberation. The comic influences much more indirectly than that.

will not in fact grow up to be an astronaut, but he may well come to engage in the kind of bravery or even heroism for the sake of his country and loved ones that he plays at in being an astronaut. Parents know this, which is why they are so careful to monitor how their children play. For example, some parents might not want their children to play with toy guns—even if the “guns” are just sticks vaguely shaped like guns—since they know the earnestness that lies beneath the play. The comic is also a form of play that, in a deep way, is the earnestness of habituation into a set of norms.

The Comic as Painless Contradiction

One might argue that Kierkegaard does not seem to view the comic as based upon earnestly held norms given that Climacus calls the comic “painless contradiction,”⁸⁸ which suggests a certain playful frivolity or at least light-heartedness that does not appear suitable to earnestness. To the contrary, this understanding of the comic as “painless” is a direct reflection of the comic’s function of persuasion concerning earnestly held norms.

To begin with, Climacus does not claim that the comic is absolutely painless, but only painless in the final analysis. The comic is finally painless because it knows a “way out,” while the tragic knows no such way out:

The tragic and the comic are the same inasmuch as both are contradiction, but *the tragic is suffering contradiction, and the comic is painless contradiction*. It makes no difference that something that the comic interpretation sees as comic can cause the comic figure imaginary suffering.... The difference between the tragic and the comic consists in the relation of the contradiction to the idea. The comic interpretation produces the contradiction or allows it to become apparent by having *in mente* [in mind] the way out; therefore the contradiction is painless. The tragic interpretation sees the contradiction and despairs over the way out.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ SKS 7, 466 / CUP 1, 514.

⁸⁹ SKS 7, 465-69 / CUP 1, 514-16.

The comic has the way out in mind, and this acts as a kind of steam-release valve that keeps the contradiction from turning tragic. For example, the difference between two boys wrestling at play and two boys in a serious fight is that, for one thing, the pain in the former is minimized, and, for another thing, in the former case if someone should accidentally get hurt or be put in too uncomfortable a hold, he can be assured of a way out since his friend would stop at once. In a serious fight, inflicting pain is the very idea, and mercy from one's opponent is no guarantee. The contradiction between two boys wrestling can be either comic or tragic depending on its being painless, on its knowing a way out.

Nevertheless, some interpreters of Kierkegaard speak of his conception of the comic as if it must be mostly painless or even absolutely painless. For example, Barrett, in the third of his four criteria governing the comic, says that "the comic contradiction must not be painful" for the individual exemplifying the contradiction.⁹⁰ It is true that it is unbecoming of the comic to relish human suffering, but that is not to say that the comic has no trace of pain in the contradiction.

Climacus gives the example of the "busy trifler," a character from Ludvig Holberg's comedy, *Den Stundesløse*,⁹¹ whose exceptional fussiness about his business matters causes comic trouble for himself and his household. The play is light-hearted, though the busy trifler's fussiness spoils the happiness of his housekeeper, his daughter,⁹²

⁹⁰ Barrett, 128.

⁹¹ *CUP* 2, 216n149.

⁹² Ludvig Holberg, *Four Plays by Holberg: The Fussy Man, The Masked Ladies, The Weathercock, Masquerades.*, trans. Henry Alexander (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 6.

and indeed himself,⁹³ and the trifler remains unreformed of his character foibles by the play's end.⁹⁴ At one point, the busy trifler laments, "I've had a lot of troublesome days in my life but never one like this. Half as many troubles would be enough to send the strongest mind crazy.... No, I'm ready to die of anger. I've had my house full of crazy and unreasonable people who seem to come on purpose to trouble me and hinder me in my business."⁹⁵ Does the pain in this Danish comedy mean that it cannot be considered truly comic by Climacus' definition, which calls for painless contradiction? No, for immediately after defining the comic as painless contradiction Climacus says, "It makes no difference that something that the comic interpretation sees as comic can cause the comic figure imaginary suffering. If it did, it would be wrong, for example, to perceive the busy trifler as comic."⁹⁶ Climacus takes for granted that the busy trifler is a comic figure, and his pain does not prevent this conclusion since the "way out" in this case is that the suffering is only imaginary, taking place on stage.⁹⁷ Consider the comic device of a character's slipping on a banana peel. If this were to happen to a friend in real life, there would be justified concern for his health, and one would fear the tragic. On film, though, it would gain a few laughs from the audience, if done artfully enough, since one

⁹³ Ibid., 60.

⁹⁴ Climacus argues that in this case not knowing the way out can still be interpreted as comic, presumably because the "suffering" of the characters is only imaginary (*SKS* 7, 472.1 / *CUP* 1, 520n).

⁹⁵ Holberg, 47.

⁹⁶ *SKS* 7, 466-67 / *CUP* 1, 514-15. See also *SKS* 7, 466.1 / *CUP* 1, 514n.

⁹⁷ One should note that such a way out does not also hold for, say, racist or sexist examples of the comic. In the case of physical comedy, the abuse is not real, however it may look. Violent noises are the exaggerations of a Foley artist, for instance, and seemingly painful acts are illusory. In the case of racist or sexist jokes, though, the joke remains genuinely racist or sexist even while being performed on a stage, and the audience's participation in them can be formative for it, whatever the personal beliefs of the actor regarding racism and sexism.

knows that the slip will not finally crush or destroy the character who, after a few grumbles, will be back on his feet again in no time. The pain is temporary and has a way out.⁹⁸

As another example, Lippitt also appears to want to minimize the pain of the comic contradiction. He describes Climacus' own humorous style in *Postscript* as a gentle mocking that provokes in the reader something like "the laughter of friendship," adding that "being made gentle fun of by Johannes Climacus is not something we mind too much."⁹⁹ The description of Climacus' use of the comic as "gentle fun" is too weak, however, and the butt of his comic comments would probably mind his slights more than a little. Climacus, who is a humorist, it must be recalled, and thus instantiates the higher

⁹⁸ One is reminded of imaginary suffering like that of the Three Stooges who are subjected even to spectacular forms of suffering, while nevertheless fully recovering to engage in more hapless mischief in the subsequent scene. Cartoons frequently partake of this trope since it is even more evident that cartoon suffering is imaginary suffering. Some cartoon figures, such as Wile E. Coyote, Donald Duck, or Tom of *Tom and Jerry*, repeatedly suffer in extraordinary ways as a part of their established cartoon narrative, and indeed their cultural identity and popularity depend upon their experience of regularly having their desires frustrated in strikingly painful manners. Their pain remains comic because they maintain the "way out" of cartoon resilience and restoration.

⁹⁹ Lippitt (2000), 163. Italics removed. Lippitt adds, "(To see this point more clearly, ask yourself whether you would rather be on the receiving end of Climacus's often quite gentle satire, or one of the full-on fulminations of someone such as Nietzsche at his most furious.)" (Ibid). It can be conceded that Climacus' satire is less fearful than Nietzsche's most furious fulminations without conceding that Climacus' satire is thereby reduced to the painlessness of being "often quite gentle." A mild satire shares the same fundamental structure as embittered satire, and the difference in degrees of sharpness does not undercut that both share directedness in their pointed remarks.

On another note, Lippitt speaks of the gentle fun of the laughter of friendship. It should be recognized, though, that friendship frequently allows for a form of the comic that is far from gentle. Friends, especially good friends, may joke with a raillery that appears to an outsider to be a merciless teasing and might be perceived as almost cruel. Indeed, some friends see this rough joking as *confirmation* of the solidity of the friendship, not its undermining. It is as if one can be assured of the strength of the friendship since it can survive such rough handling. As a general rule, it might be said that the stronger the relationship, the rougher the joking that is permitted. Even out-and-out insults can be affirming of one's confidence, since one's friends can know one's foibles and weaknesses—even famous tales of one's foolishness or idiocy—and still remain friends. This proves that one's shortcomings, though laughable, are not fatal. In this context, one finds language of gentleness used to describe the laughter of friendship to be inadequate. Interestingly, Lippitt seems to acknowledge this point while commenting on an essay by David Owen (Ibid., 162), but he immediately moves away from this edgy form of the comic for his own argument.

form of the comic known as “humor,” is nevertheless not above ridiculing his opponent when he thinks it necessary. For example, he describes as “ludicrous” the attempt to submit the religious-paradoxical to human understanding, something he accuses many of his contemporaries of trying to do,¹⁰⁰ and he is not above even sticking it to a clergyman at this very point: “A Christian clergyman who does not know how, with humility and the passion of existence-effort, to keep himself and his congregation in check by proclaiming that the paradox cannot and should not be understood...he is comic.”¹⁰¹ This humorist diagnoses the comic as far more than gentle fun among friends. The comic performs the noble and earnest task of subjecting those who fail to respect the Christian paradox properly to the laughter of ridicule. Elsewhere, Climacus is explicit about his intent to subject his opponents to ridicule: “Whoever cannot perceive this is obtuse; and with the power I have in the comic at this moment I intend to make ridiculous whoever ventures to raise an objection.”¹⁰² Indeed, Lippitt himself acknowledges that Kierkegaard is known for joking at the expense of Hegelianism,¹⁰³ and we see Climacus carry out the same spirit of polemical humor. Recall that Climacus is able to describe the comic as the reaper’s scythe with a “biting blade,” noting that “[t]he task of cutting down is a solemn act.”¹⁰⁴ Climacus applies this biting blade, for example, in service to the earnest matter

¹⁰⁰ *SKS* 7, 511 / *CUP* 1, 561-62.

¹⁰¹ *SKS* 7, 513 / *CUP* 1, 564.

¹⁰² *SKS* 7, 130 / *CUP* 1, 140.

¹⁰³ Lippitt (2000), 12.

¹⁰⁴ *SKS* 7, 256-57 / *CUP* 1, 282. Even beyond polemics, Climacus does not hesitate to enter grim areas with his humor. For example, Climacus repeats a tale from Lucian where a man who has just assured a friend that he will accept his dinner invitation is suddenly killed by a falling roof tile. “Isn’t that something to die laughing over, adds Charon,” the ferryman into the underworld (*SKS* 7, 85-86 / *CUP* 1, 86). Also, in a discursus on death that includes swallowing sulfuric acid and drowning oneself, Climacus

of authority and Biblical interpretation when he uses his comic powers to lambaste the “timid obsequiousness” of a “childish orthodoxy” that cunningly seeks to manipulate the Bible—and God—to its own advantage.¹⁰⁵ For Climacus, the distinguishing mark of the comic is not its absolute painlessness but its essential painlessness,¹⁰⁶ meaning that for the pain found in the contradiction there exists a “way out.” Indeed, if there were absolutely no pain in the comic contradiction, then why would Climacus even need to posit a “way out”? Why would a “way out” be necessary or desirable unless there were some pain in the comic contradiction to drive one towards the exit?

notes that he believes “one can die from such a ludicrous trifle that the most solemn person cannot help laughing at death” (*SKS* 7, 153 / *CUP* 1, 165).

These qualities in Climacus’ humor hold for Kierkegaard as well. I have argued that, for Kierkegaard, the comic is not a state of pure happiness, light frivolity, and painless or gentle fun. One should further note that Kierkegaard’s use of the comic can be darker and edgier than is frequently acknowledged. Consider the following grim examples of Kierkegaard’s use of the comic in his journals, which touch on death, suicide, madness, and grotesque physicality:

“One who walked along contemplating suicide—at that very moment a stone fell down and killed him, and he ended with the words: Praise the Lord!” (*Pap.* I A 158 / *JP* 2, 1672).

“In the case of Swift, it was an irony of fate that in his old age he entered the insane asylum he himself had erected in his early years” (*Pap.* III B 9 / *JP* 2, 1727). Cf. *SKS* 2, 29 / *EOI*, 21.

“A man who lets himself be skinned alive in order to show how the humorous smile is produced by the contraction of a particular muscle—and thereupon follows this with a lecture on humor” (*FF*:168 / *JP* 2, 1718).

“When an ironist laughs at whimsicalities and witticisms of a humorist, he is like the vulture tearing away at Prometheus’s liver, for the humorist’s whimsicalities are not *capricious little darlings* but the *sons of pain*, and with every one of them goes a little piece of his innermost entrails, and it is the emaciated ironist who needs the humorist’s desperate depth. His laughter is often the grin of death. Just as a shriek wrung from pain could very well appear to be laughable to someone at great distance who had no intimation of the situation of the person from whom it came, just as the twitch of a muscle on the face of a deaf-mute or a taciturn person could appear to someone to be laughable, that is, caused by laughter in the individual (like the dead man’s grin which is explained as the muscle twitch of rigor mortis, the eternally humorous smile over human wretchedness)—so it goes with the laughter of the humorist, and it probably betrays a greater psychological insight to cry over such a thing (note—not a jeremiad, for one of the sad things about man is that he troubles himself about so many irrelevancies)—than to laugh over it” (*DD*:68 / *JP* 2, 1706).

¹⁰⁵ *SKS* 7, 547-48 / *CUP* 1, 603-4.

¹⁰⁶ Climacus can be found describing the comic as a “painless” relation and then, immediately afterward, saying that the comic is a contradiction “where one justifiably disregards the pain because it is nonessential” (*SKS* 466.1 / *CUP* 1, 514n). Pain may be present in the comic, just not essentially so.

Satire and polemics. One might think that satire is an exception to the painlessness of the comic, but it is not. Regarding satire, Climacus says, “Satire also causes pain, but this pain is teleologically dialectical and oriented toward healing.”¹⁰⁷ In Climacus’ understanding, satire would be a sub-category of the comic, the “painless” category, even though it causes pain. The reason is that, whatever sting satire may put to one’s pride, it is comic and knows a way out, so it is painless, fundamentally speaking. Indeed, satire does not just know a way out; it attempts to communicate this way out, often indirectly. Satire, then, can be a voice for ethical advancement, which is why Climacus says it is “oriented toward healing.” The satirist attempts to show his interlocutor the pain of his current position while leaving a way out, in the hopes that the interlocutor will leap through the exit and escape his current poor situation. He would then adopt the new norm that sees the contradiction of his former, lower position while having escaped from its pain. The interlocutor may, perhaps, wince at it a little in memory of his former foolishness, but in truth his new loyalties lie not with the past but with his current norm, which gave him the painlessness of a way out.

It is perhaps especially apparent in the case of satire that we see the comic operating out of a set of basic norms. Satire argues for something, even if only indirectly, so there is something at stake for the satirist, something that he holds in earnest and desires to defend and promote. That the satirist is willing to clash with some opposing set of norms shows that he values his own position and wishes to fight for it, which makes clear the ethical implications of competing norms. The satirist fights not just because someone else happens to hold a variant position but because he is convinced that

¹⁰⁷ SKS 7, 467 / CUP 1, 515.

that person is *wrong*. Certainly, not all forms of satire are of the embittered Juvenalian kind, but even a more playful Horatian satire is satire nonetheless and operates in defense of its norms.

Possibly one is willing to concede that satire specifically is a form of the comic that polemically operates out of norms that contradict other norms, resulting in a painful clash that is oriented to the painlessness of a way out, while one resists the idea that this description holds for other and more varied forms of the comic. For Kierkegaard, though, satire is not an exceptional form of the comic in this way. He believes that all forms of the comic contain the polemical, writing that “the comic has the polemical as a necessary element.”¹⁰⁸ Moreover, the polemical element in the comic is not some lesser or baser form of the comic that, for example, is not accessible to Christians. He writes, “Humor by definition becomes a polemical factor in the Christian view of life.”¹⁰⁹ In the broad category of the comic, which includes humor, the polemical is not an accidental element but one there of necessity. Kierkegaard’s conception of the nature of the comic necessitates the presence of the polemical, even if the polemical element is not equally obvious to us in every comic instance.¹¹⁰ To put it another way, all forms of the comic, even those not typically placed into the category of “satire,” partake in the polemics and the teleological ordering that one associates with satire. It is not only satire that can be

¹⁰⁸ *Pap.* III B 7 / *JP* 2, 1726.

¹⁰⁹ *Pap.* III B 11 / *JP* 2, 1729. Cf. DD:6.b / *JP* 2, 1686. J. G. Hamann was not reluctant to use humor polemically in defense of Christianity, and Kierkegaard’s similar attitude speaks to Hamann’s influence on him.

¹¹⁰ Lippitt rightly notes that Climacus can be said to be polemical in that he has an agenda like a satirist does, but he nevertheless shows discomfort with emphasizing the polemical element in Climacus, preferring to speak of the “relaxed geniality” of his humor (Lippitt [2000], 128-29).

described as having pain that is “teleologically dialectical and oriented toward healing”¹¹¹ since the comic as such, as Climacus defines it, is ordered towards a way out. The comic has an agenda.¹¹² The polemical cast to Climacus’ use of the comic therefore cannot be denigrated as, say, unqualified cruelty or abuse since his use of comic pain is never for the sake of the pain but always for the sake of directing one to the healing exit of the way out.

Note also, however, that for all of the polemical cast to the comic, when the way out from the comic pain is obscured or blocked Climacus becomes critical of these so-called forms of the comic. Returning to Holberg’s “busy trifler,” Climacus says:

Against arrogating forms of the religious, humor legitimately uses the comic because a religious person surely must himself know the way out if he only is willing. If this may not be presupposed, then such an interpretation becomes dubious in the same sense as a comic interpretation of the busy trifler would be if it was the case that he actually was mentally deranged.¹¹³

The comic must be used with ethical and religious correctness and not haphazardly.

When the religious makes use of the comic, the polemical is not discarded, of course, but

¹¹¹ SKS 7, 467 / CUP 1, 515.

¹¹² A passage from *Stages on Life’s Way* recognizes the power that indignation grants the comic, even making it a weapon: “For example, the most devastating comic perception would be the one in which indignation is latent—yet no one detects it because of the laughter. *Vis comica* [Comic power] is the most responsible weapon and thus is essentially present only in the hands of someone who has a fully equivalent pathos. Hence, anyone who could in truth make a hypocrite a butt of laughter will also be able to crush him with indignation. But anyone who wants to use indignation and does not have the corresponding *vis comica* will readily degenerate into rhetoric and will himself become comic” (SKS 6, 340 / SLW, 366-67).

¹¹³ SKS 7, 475 / CUP 1, 523. For all of Climacus’ approving use of Holberg’s busy trifler, Kierkegaard does not hesitate to criticize Holberg’s comedies when they descend into “grinning malice.” He says, “To present as comic, or in an actual situation to laugh at that under which a man suffers—no, I could not bring myself to do that. When such is the case, I do not feel at all inclined to laugh...” (NB14:126 / JP 2, 1763).

it is handled with a certain gentleness or care that does not forget the goal towards which its use of the comic is aimed.¹¹⁴

The Relationship of Comic Norms to the Auditor

Climacus reminds us that we are ethically responsible for our use of the comic.¹¹⁵ The ethical responsibility comes in part because of the relationship that the comic has to one who is listening to or observing the comic instance. If it is true that having a sense of humor can be described as having a virtue,¹¹⁶ or at least that a sense of humor evidences one's virtues through the comic norms, then it cannot be overlooked that the connection made between the comic figure and his auditors is also one of import for virtues and ethics. As Roberts puts it, "That a person's sense of humor reflects his or her character seems to confirm, in a way that Aristotle did not have in mind, his observation that what a person takes pleasure in marks his or her character."¹¹⁷ Let us consider two important points concerning the relationship of comic norms to an auditor of the comic that are implicit to Kierkegaard's account.

1) Comic Effectiveness Depends upon Shared Norms

The first point is that comic effectiveness depends upon shared norms. Since operative norms are a prerequisite for the comic to function, as argued above, then a comic example like a joke must utilize norms that are shared by the auditors in order for the comic to strike home and be experienced in the way it is intended to be. Consider

¹¹⁴ SKS 7, 476.1 / CUP 1, 524n; SKS 7, 513-14 / CUP 1, 565.

¹¹⁵ SKS 7,471.1 / CUP 1, 519n.

¹¹⁶ Lippitt (2000), 159ff.; Roberts (1990), 177ff.

¹¹⁷ Roberts (1988), 127-28.

Jonathan Swift's famous work of satire, "A Modest Proposal," in which he suggests that poor Irish families sell their children to be eaten, which would help to increase family income. The ostensible proposal is clearly not a serious suggestion, and although it appears to be a recommendation to the Irish poor it in fact is a satire upon the landlords and political economists whose uncaring stance towards the poor was leaving them in scandalous living conditions. The goal of Swift's pamphlet was to motivate the landlords and economists to moral transformation, presenting the stinging pain of their current condition of moral reproach and hoping that they would in turn find it too morally uncomfortable and so take the "way out" of greater charity to the poor. It should be observed that the effectiveness of Swift's satire, though, depends upon shared norms. Most obviously, Swift presented a proposal of such moral abhorrence, namely that of eating one's children or of selling them to be eaten, that everyone involved in the political discussion would be sure to recognize the moral abhorrence and so read Swift's work as satire. Consider, though, if Swift had been writing to truly monstrous people who thought that the poor were so subhuman such that selling of their children to be eaten would be no moral problem at all. In such a case, the effect of Swift's satire would be lost on them, and some particularly dense individuals might consider Swift's idea a genuinely good one to be put in practice. The belief that the eating of children is morally abhorrent is a necessary norm for this satire.

A less obvious norm of the satire, though, is the belief that the Irish poor are in such dire straits that selling their children for food might be their only remaining way out of poverty. One can imagine a landlord reading Swift's satire, agreeing, of course, that the eating of infants is deplorable but disagreeing that the poor were truly so poor as to

have to resort to such drastic actions. In other words, the effectiveness of Swift's satire in getting his readers to laugh in the right places and in convincing his readers of his ethical perspective depends upon the shared convictions that cannibalizing children is deplorable *and* that the poor are in such dire straits as to be drawing near to a position of having to consider doing just that. If either norm is not shared, the satire fails. Swift's same satire written in defense of middle-class American families, for example, would seem unjustifiably exaggerated.¹¹⁸

2) *The Comic Can Be Persuasive in Establishing New Norms*

The effectiveness of the comic, then, depends upon shared norms. A second point, though, is that if the comic is done artfully enough and can invite auditors to laugh at all the right places, then the comic can be *persuasive* in establishing new norms, namely the norms required to be shared for the joke to be funny.¹¹⁹ This is precisely what

¹¹⁸ Satire depends upon convincing the object of its satire of the "pain" of his position, requiring him to seek a way out, but, as was argued above, this depends upon shared norms. An implication of this, both for satire specifically and the comic more generally, is that for comedy to work there must be sufficient overlap of norms, including a sufficient overlap of moral standards. This may help to explain why group laughter is experienced as engendering solidarity. The group laughter is affirming the presence of a mutually held set of norms, which helps to solidify group identity. It also suggests that the stand-up comic may have a more difficult job in a more diversified culture. Certainly, many stand-up comics take that as a challenge to be met, seeing their role as catalysts for diffusing social barriers and solidifying group identity. This might be seen as aspiring more towards Kierkegaardian "humor" with its acknowledgement of a common human condition (*SKS* 7, 409 / *CUP* 1, 450; *SKS* 7, 500 / *CUP* 1, 550) than to Kierkegaardian "irony," which draws distinctions among people (*SKS* 7, 502-3 / *CUP* 1, 553). As a culture fragments, though, the comic will be less universally recognizable and satire will be less generally effective. Stanley Hauerwas, for example, occasionally comments that he pities people like Kurt Vonnegut since it is increasingly impossible to satirize in our culture. The more extreme moral positions become, the more difficult it is to heighten the situation in order to subject it to ridicule and to suggest correction.

¹¹⁹ This is one way that the comic constitutes indirect communication for Kierkegaard. Directly, one could demand of someone, "You must believe *p*!" This is not likely to succeed, as Kierkegaard well knows. Even the parroting back of agreement to *p* is no guarantee of true existential appropriation. With the comic, however, the norms are not so directly evident, and one does not feel commanded to obey in a way that harms one's subjective self-activity from external imperiousness. Further, if the comic is genuinely perceived and experienced as funny, then the norms are being existentially adopted to just that degree. Comic persuasion is more appealing and potentially more effective than direct command or instruction. By laughing at a comic instance in which *p* is an operative norm, adoption of that norm becomes a much more likely possibility.

Swift is intending. Perhaps if enough people laugh at the outrage of eating children, they will subtly appropriate the other norm of believing in the dire situation of the poor as well. One observes with small children that they will often join in the laughter of their parents at some comic moment on television, even if the children themselves do not know why it is funny. Laughing together means solidarity, and the desire to achieve solidarity can be persuasive enough for people to accept the comic norms, even unbeknownst to them. Though norms must be logically prior to the comic, epistemologically they might follow, with an audience learning the rhythms of the enacted comedy, laughing at all the right times, and therefore appropriating the norms that make the comedy function.

Laughter, then, is a sign of assenting to the norm of the comic. One laughs when the comic rings true. This is why Climacus can say:

In everyday life, we laugh when something is made ludicrous, and after laughing one sometimes says: But it is indefensible to make something like that ludicrous. But if it is made really ludicrous, one cannot keep from spreading the story—naturally, with the edifying primary clause following the laughter: It is indefensible to make something like that ludicrous. It goes unnoticed how ludicrous it is that the contradiction rests in the feigned attempt to act ethically by way of an edifying subordinate clause rather than by abandoning the antecedent.¹²⁰

Climacus describes the behavior of laughing at the comic but then following that with an advisory that such ridicule is indefensible as a “feigned attempt to act ethically.” The speaker’s true norms are revealed by what is found to be funny, regardless of what moral cautionings and chasers may surround the jest. Consequently, if the moral norm assumed by the comic is objectionable enough, then one will not find the contradiction to be funny. This may be assumed when Climacus, while affirming that humor is associated

¹²⁰ *SKS* 7, 465 / *CUP* 1, 513. See also *SKS* 7, 296 / *CUP* 1, 325.

with the religious, says that Christianity “has never been a friend of impudent antics.”¹²¹ Similarly, while Climacus admits of the comic when a German-Danish pastor accidentally declares “The Word became pork (*Fleisch*),”¹²² he elsewhere writes “But when this happens in church, I must not laugh at it, because I am not an esthetic spectator but a religious listener, whatever the pastor is.”¹²³ One should not laugh at such things, even if they are excused later, for by doing so one conforms one’s norms to those assumed at the time by the comic.

The comic is a powerful force for norming human behavior. Consequently, it matters to Kierkegaard that the comic is done rightly and handled with appropriate responsibility.¹²⁴ To say that the comic is an ethical or moral force is not necessarily to

¹²¹ *SKS* 7, 123 / *CUP* 1, 131. To say that religiousness need not fear the comic, as is being argued in this dissertation, does not deny that there will be some subjects and some subjects in certain contexts that religious earnestness will refuse to laugh at. Comic laughter does not get free reign over everything as if it were the highest mode of human existence, submitting even matters of faith to its hilarious mockery.

¹²² *SKS* 7, 470.1 / *CUP* 1, 518n.

¹²³ *SKS* 7, 467.1 / *CUP* 1, 515n. Cf. *SKS* 7, 442.1 / *CUP* 1, 487n.

¹²⁴ Throughout my argument, I make periodic assertions of the need to handle the comic with responsibility, using the word “responsibly” or other approximately synonymous formulations. In the secondary literature on Kierkegaard, being “responsible” is often associated with the ethical stage of existence, perhaps invoking *Sittlichkeit*, middle-class Danish norms, or figures such as Judge William. Because Kierkegaard can be critical of such bourgeois morality, especially from the vantage of the knight of faith who believes in a teleological suspension of the ethical, it may seem strange to some that I am presenting Kierkegaard as advocating the responsible use of the comic. I do not necessarily wish to invoke such associations with my statements, however. Kierkegaard is very willing to present the comic as flaunting the behavioral expectations for a well-mannered member of society (E.g., consider the writer of prefaces, who is considered “immoral” because he openly and amusingly breaks many social conventions [*SKS* 4, 470 / *P*, 6]). When reading the word “responsible,” one must always keep in mind of that to which it is being suggested that one ought to be responsible. For example, one ought to be responsible in one’s use of the comic in a way that does not intentionally or thoughtlessly harm another person, but this is not equivalent to saying that one may only use the comic in ways that would be sanctioned by polite society. Swift’s satire, for example, is pointed, rude, and even grotesque in its subverting the interests of the moneyed landlords, but it is very “responsible” in its interest in and care for the poor. Indeed, amidst its angular style, it is even responsible towards the landlords themselves, calling them back to moral and humane living. A responsible use of the comic has an earnest concern for fellow human beings, whether they appreciate and recognize this or not, and this may or may not implicate societal concerns. For example, Kierkegaard is not utterly without concern for his society, and he might be understood as defending its interests and health during the *Corsair* affair. At the end of the day, though, Kierkegaard believes that the comic must be responsible to God, and against that concern no societal considerations hold

say that it is preserving of a good ethical system, only that its origin is from and its effects can be felt in morality. At its best, the comic “honors the moral”¹²⁵ in the positive sense, showing people our common faults while also holding open a way out, preferably towards the mercy of God. At its worst, the comic may confirm us more deeply in our immorality.

For example, Kierkegaard shows concern that many so-called comedies of his day are having a “demoralizing” effect on Denmark by coaxing them to laugh in inappropriate ways and at inappropriate times.¹²⁶ He sees increasingly indiscriminate laughter as a correlate to “the world’s retrogression” and is unnerved by the comic presentation of human corruption and wretchedness. Not only does Kierkegaard’s concern express his belief in the great power of the comic, but it also demonstrates his belief that the comic should operate out of earnestly held norms, even if, as in this case, the norms paradoxically endorse the idea that less and less in life should be treated with earnestness. Kierkegaard believes that the grounding norms have a sufficiently cognitive dimension for a life view to be discerned in them: The demoralization through comic laughter “signifies that the view of life behind it is despair: All is phoney—so let us laugh. It is reminiscent in a certain sense of the chorus of a drinking song: Everything is lousy—so let us clink the glasses.”¹²⁷ Beneath the hilarity of laughter lies an earnest root

weight.

¹²⁵ *SKS* 7, 246.1 / *CUP* 1, 271n. That is, the comic that has not degenerated into some illegitimate form honors the moral. More about illegitimate forms of the comic will be addressed below.

¹²⁶ E.g., NB10:70 / *JP* 2, 1761; NB14:126 / *JP* 2, 1763.

¹²⁷ NB8:24 / *JP* 2, 1757. Comic norms should not be reduced to pure cognition, since Kierkegaard ties the comic so deeply to human existence itself, which is more than intellect alone, but neither should their cognitive content be downplayed or removed from the discussion, for cognition is also a part of human existence.

of despair. The despair drives the reckless laughter which, in turn, reconfirms the despairing grounds. Kierkegaard believes that such a misuse of the comic makes a bad thing worse. As he says, “It is tragic and indeed immoral for a woman to be of easy virtue, but the woman who is capable of being delighted by loose-living, comically conceived, has sunk far more deeply.”¹²⁸ The comic is a power that can be misappropriated for immoral formation. It is one thing to sin, which everyone does, as Lutheran Kierkegaard would know. But the proper response to sin is to take it seriously, own responsibility for one’s misdoing, and repent of the sin before God. The hilarity of immoral comic laughter, though, moves the place of earnestness away from the place of responsible ownership and repentance by trivializing the wretched act with an amusing presentation and establishes a new place of earnestness that often looks like pride and delight in one’s wrongdoing. The comic, misused, protects one against an earnest repentance rather than leading one towards it, as Kierkegaard believes the rightly used comic should do. The sinner has not only erred but also has barred the door that leads back towards repentance. Thus, in considering two women engaged in immorality, it is

For example, Roberts is exactly right when he says, “A sense for the normal is basic to any sense of humor” (Roberts [1990], 181), but he unfortunately downplays the important role of cognition and belief for those comic norms by arguing against the position that Christian beliefs (i.e., the sovereignty of God, the sinfulness of man, the doctrine of grace, etc.) are foundational to a Christian perspective of what is normal and, thus, to Christian amusement (Ibid., 181-82). He goes so far as to argue that Christian beliefs “are neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for seeing the Christian incongruities” (Ibid., 182). Climacus, on the other hand, argues that a conception of humanity’s total guilt is a necessary basis of the comic form of humor, sustaining its comedy (*SKS* 7, 504 / *CUP* 1, 554-55). One can agree with Roberts’ point that pure cognition is not sufficient for comic amusement, especially for Kierkegaard’s existentially concerned conception of the comic, but it is surely untrue that cognitive content and belief are not necessary to it. One’s perception of the comic is perspectival, and one’s perspective entails some requisite amount of propositional content.

Indeed, some examples of the comic are exceedingly dependent on cognitive content. Consider the following quip from Steven Wright: “I have a quantum car. Every time I look at the speedometer I get lost.” Perceiving the comic nature of this comment requires enough knowledge of quantum mechanics to be familiar with the Heisenberg uncertainty principle!

¹²⁸ NB8:24 / *JP* 2, 1757.

the one who is capable of being comically delighted by the loose-living that has sunk more deeply. One must take care in one's use of the comic since it can lead both oneself and others astray.

Comic Judgment and the Comic as a Metric of Subjectivity

A culture that is malformed, then, will find the wrong things funny. Its norms will be misplaced, and sharing these misplaced norms with others does not justify the situation, as if large numbers of people in agreement altered the truth that they are in the wrong. Rather, noting what one laughs at is one way of determining and evaluating one's moral health. For example, Kierkegaard believes that his age finds the essentially Christian to be comic, which he takes as evidence that the age is not itself essentially Christian. He says of European Christendom:

Christianity does not really exist. Christendom is waiting for a comic poet *a la* Cervantes, who will create a counterpart to Don Quixote out of the essentially Christian.

The only difference will be that no poetic exaggeration will be required at all, as in Don Quixote—no, all he needs to do is to take any essentially true Christian life, not to mention simply taking Christ or an apostle. The comic element arises because the age has changed so enormously that it regards this as comic.¹²⁹

Kierkegaard does not believe that the essentially Christian life is inherently comic. It is only found to be so by an age that must, then, not be essentially Christian. The manner of appropriating the comic locates one, as it were, in relation to what is perceived to be comic. Since it is possible to perceive the comic in both the “right” places and the “wrong” places, the comic is a very important metric for determining one's subjective development and one's ethical and religious maturity. The comic can be used as a

¹²⁹ NB12:164 / JP 2, 1762.

sounding technique for determining the “depth” of someone that one is speaking with. If the person gets the joke or finds the comic in the proper manner, then it speaks to the shared norms of the interlocutors.

Just as it is a mistake to find the wrong thing comical, as Kierkegaard’s age does in finding Christianity comical, it is equally an error not to discover the comic where it properly is. For example, Climacus believes it to be a contradiction—a contradiction that gives rise to the comic—that his age encourages an individual interested in his own eternal salvation to begin engaging in objective speculation. The fact that his age does not discover this peculiar method to be a contradiction is an indictment of it and of its understanding of human subjectivity. Climacus says,

Understood in this way...the comic readily becomes manifest in the contradiction. The subjective individual is impassionedly, infinitely interested in his eternal happiness and is now supposed to be helped by speculative thought, that is, by his own speculating. But in order to speculate, he must take the very opposite path, must abandon and lose himself in objectivity, disappear from himself. This incongruity will completely prevent him from beginning and will pass comic judgment on every affirmation that he has gained something in taking this path.¹³⁰

There is a contradiction in the age’s methods that the age does not perceive but ought to. For those with eyes to see, such as the humorist Climacus, this contradiction reveals itself in its true comic form, while no comic contradiction is discovered by the dull age. When the child of the age foolishly declares his (impossible) results from this contradictory method, its contradictory nature will pass “comic judgment” on his sunny affirmations. That is, the comic arises, like one of the Eumenides, in response to the foolishly incongruous declarations in order to subject it to the judgment of laughter. When one does not pay due respect to the comic by honoring the comic contradiction where it

¹³⁰ *SKS* 7, 60 / *CUP* 1, 56-57.

exists, then that one becomes contradictory himself and is subject to justly deserved comic judgment. It is comical not to recognize the comic. This is why Climacus can describe his age as “the most glorious buffoonery and farce,” though it is unaware that this is so.¹³¹ Its attempt to be objective towards Christianity, which demands of us the subjective passion of faith, turns Christendom’s dispute about Christianity comic, and its confusion is even more comic than the confusion of paganism, since the stakes are higher.¹³² Climacus, then, does not hesitate to enact comic judgment on the age that, similarly, desires to understand the subjectivity of ethics through the objective means of world-historical philosophical speculation. This age is not satisfied with the “subjective ethical,” and, he mocks, its letting “the ethical become something whose discovery requires a prophet with a world-historical eye on world history—that is a rare, ingeniously comic invention. O fortunate nineteenth century!”¹³³ The attempt to discover the ethical through objective means is a “comic” invention because it exposes itself as contradictory and ludicrous.

Either way, whether one finds something comic that is not or fails to find something comic that is, one is judged by the comic. This shows that for Kierkegaard, although the comic is undeniably connected to the cultivation of human subjectivity,¹³⁴ the comic is not finally a relativistically subjective phenomenon. The true comic conforms to the nature of reality and can sit in judgment over a comic failure—whether

¹³¹ *SKS* 7, 79.1 / *CUP* 1, 79n.

¹³² *SKS* 7, 555-56 / *CUP* 1, 611-13.

¹³³ *SKS* 7, 134 / *CUP* 1, 144.

¹³⁴ Climacus says, “That subjectivity, inwardness, is truth, is my thesis; that the pseudonymous authors relate themselves to it is easy enough to see, if in no other way, then in their eye for the comic. The comic is always a sign of maturity...” (*SKS* 7, 255-56 / *CUP* 1, 281).

or not the judged subjectively recognizes this comic reality. For Kierkegaard, something can be comic even if no one laughs or even recognizes the absurdity, and something may not in fact be comic even if it does elicit laughter.¹³⁵ The comic is not an amoral playpen but has such ethical and religious relevance that it can function as judge over the illegitimate. It acts almost as a kind of divine herald, evaluating the comic righteousness of the various subjectivities to see if they conform to the nature of reality.¹³⁶

Contradiction between Inner and Outer

For the sake of clarity, most of the discussion has focused on finding comic incongruity in common, even trivial, incidents, such as considering a man who dresses oddly in relation to social norms of appropriate dress. Such examples are serviceable for the point, but Kierkegaard would consider many of them to be less than the most essential and interesting form of the comic. More than a way to discover little contradictions between two external or objective elements, for example, the comic is interesting to Kierkegaard for its importance to subjectivity, and in that regard the comic is interesting for its ability to locate and highlight the disjunction between inner and outer.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ SKS 7, 469-71 / CUP 1, 517-18. The final estimation of whether something is “truly comic” or not does not depend on human opinion because Kierkegaard includes God in his equations. Human opinions can be mistaken, even if all of humanity is in accord, because humanity must nevertheless answer to its creator.

¹³⁶ Faithful wielders of the comic act in service to this authority: “The power in the comic is the policeman’s badge, the emblem of jurisdiction that every agent who in our day actually is an agent must carry” (SKS 7, 256 / CUP 1, 282).

¹³⁷ Roberts gives the following helpful excursus: “‘Existence,’ ‘inwardness,’ ‘subjectivity,’ being an ‘individual,’ and ‘character,’ while closely related, are not perfectly interchangeable. Since Kierkegaard’s choice of vocabulary is usually motivated by polemical considerations, understanding is aided by keeping in mind the targets of his disputes. ‘Subjectivity’ (*Subjektivitet*) suggests a contrast with the interests, attitudes, and compulsions (that is, the character-formation) associated with the activities of speculative philosophy and professional historical scholarship. Climacus calls this formation of personality ‘objectivity.’ ‘Inwardness’ (*Inderlighed*) often implies a different contrast—with ‘externalities’ such as social position, reputation, the ‘results’ of one’s actions, and publicly observable natural phenomena (see,

Climacus explains that the greater one's inwardness, the greater the contrast with the external world, undoing a direct relationship with it:

But pathos in the form of contrast is inwardness; it remains with the communicator even when expressed, and it cannot be appropriated directly except through the other's *self*-activity, and the contrastive form is the dynamometer of inwardness. The more consummate the contrastive form, the greater the inwardness; and the less it is present, to the point of being direct communication, the less the inwardness.¹³⁸

Direct relation to the world is a sacrifice of inwardness, so to cherish one's inwardness is to heighten the contrastive relation to the world.¹³⁹ Since the comic is based on contradiction or misrelation, the presence of this misrelation between the inner and outer

e.g., *CUP* 243-7; *SV*⁴ VII 205-8). A life characterized by 'outwardness' would be a formation of personality all right, but in a sort of oblivion that an outwardly successful life can mask a corrupt, trivial, or empty 'heart.' 'Self' (*Selv*) is sometimes used in a similar way.'" (Robert C. Roberts, "Existence, emotion, and virtue: Classical themes in Kierkegaard," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 178).

¹³⁸ *SKS* 7, 220-21 / *CUP* 1, 242-43.

Given the appropriate space, a connection could be made between the comic's marking the contradiction between inner and outer and Kierkegaard's understanding of how irony and humor function as "incognitos" for the ethical and the religious, respectively (*SKS* 7, 456-59 / *CUP* 1, 503-6). Climacus says that one who has an inner earnestness places irony or humor down like a "veil" to defend his inwardness from a direct relationship with the external world (*SKS* 7, 459 / *CUP* 1, 506). It is this incognito that protects one's inner passion and enthusiasm (NB2:61 / *JP* 2, 1749). Because of this, some may suspect such a person of merely jesting all of the time and having no earnestness, but his earnestness is the very source of his power to sustain the incognito, remaining true to the misrelation between inner and outer even at the price of suffering. Climacus suggests that one who holds some truth, perhaps even a religious truth, should "dutifully put up with being accused of light-mindedness, lack of earnestness, etc." because of his own discipline in avoiding adherents, direct communication, and commensurability with the world (*SKS* 7, 237 / *CUP* 1, 261). However, in Kierkegaard's understanding in truth it is not a lack of earnestness but precisely the presence of an immense earnestness of character that is able to sustain an incognito of irony or humor even, as with Socrates, for many years at a time (NB5:147 / *JP* 2, 1753). Such a powerful comic projection is evidence of a powerful earnestness behind it. Moreover, it is the religious person who, having the highest resolution of inwardness, has the greatest capacity for discovering the comic (*SKS* 7, 420-21 / *CUP* 1, 462-63). The inner may be in such misrelation with the outer that, Climacus says, "the infinite can be at work in a human being, and no one, no one discovers it by looking at him," and he notes that such a situation is "truly comic" (*SKS* 7, 90 / *CUP* 1, 91).

¹³⁹ As Kierkegaard also puts it in an allusion to Mark 8:36-37, one loses one's soul in trying directly to gain the world: "If he now wants to gain the world, he must overcome this disquiet until once again, like the undulation of the waves, he vanishes in the life of the world—then he has won the world. However, if he wants to gain his soul, he must let this resistance become more and more pronounced and in so doing gain his soul, for his soul was this very difference..." (*SKS* 5, 165 / *EUD*, 165). See the wider passage: *SKS* 5, 163-66 / *EUD*, 164-67.

opens the possibility of the awakening of comic perception here. As Climacus puts it, “The comic emerges through the relation of hidden inwardness to the surrounding world as the religious person hears and sees what produces a comic effect when it is joined together with his inward passion.”¹⁴⁰ One’s inward passion—or, one might say, earnestness—is incommensurable with the external world, giving rise to a contrastive relationship within which the comic may be seen to emerge. In this misrelation, the comic effect has alerted one not merely to a contradiction between expected conventions of dress, for example, but to a contradiction that reveals an important ethical and theological truth about the nature of subjectivity and its incommensurability with and essential misrelation to the external.¹⁴¹ Consequently, one’s perception of the comic

¹⁴⁰ *SKS* 7, 463 / *CUP* 1, 511. Climacus’ example here is explicitly a religious one. While religiousness is seen as a perfection of inwardness, the comic could also be discovered by a nonreligious inwardness.

¹⁴¹ Consider two comic examples from Climacus where the essential contradiction is located in the misrelation between the inner and the outer:

“Hamlet swears by the fire tongs; the comic is in the contradiction between the solemnity of the oath and the reference that annuls the oath, no matter what the object is” (*SKS* 7, 466.1 / *CUP* 1, 514n). The solemnity and earnestness of Hamlet’s inward passion is in misrelation to the triviality of the object he swears upon: fire tongs. The comic contradiction is more evident to us because of the triviality of the object, which heightens the contrast with Hamlet’s passionate oath. Additionally, however, Climacus seems to suggest that *no object whatsoever* is truly commensurable with the infinity of human inwardness and passion, even if it were a more noble or exalted object such as a sword, the moon, the flag, etc. (Cf. Matthew 23:16-22, where Jesus suggests that even swearing by the temple, the gold, or the heavens is insufficiently exalted if considered in a way that does not implicate God). Even the highest of externalities cannot fully accommodate the infinity of a passionate human inwardness, so a misrelation must ever be present. The misrelation is simply *more* immediately evident when the object sworn by is especially trivial.

“When a soldier stands in the street staring at the glorious window display in a fancy gift shop and comes closer in order to see better, when with his face really aglow and his eyes fixed on the finery in the window he does not notice that the basement entrance extends out inordinately far so that he vanishes into the basement just when he is about to have a proper look—then the contradiction is in the movement, the upward direction of the head and gaze and the underground direction down into the basement. If he had not been gazing upward, it would not have been so ludicrous. Thus it is more comic if a man who is walking and gazing at the stars falls into a hole than if it happens to someone who is not as elevated above the earthly” (*SKS* 7, 468.1 / *CUP* 1, 516n). This is not an example of mere slapstick. The essential contradiction here is between the soldier’s passionate subjective state, symbolized by his glowing face and the upward direction of his gaze, and the objective reality of the basement entrance, which does not sympathize with the soldier’s delight and thwarts him precisely at the tantalizing moment of highest subjective passion. Basements do not care about a soldier’s delight, even if he, perhaps on temporary leave from military austerity, revels in seeing the sights of the big city. If his inner passion were even more elevated (hence, “gazing at the stars”), the contradiction would be greater and the result even more comic.

functions as a metric of one's subjectivity: "That subjectivity, inwardness, is truth, is my thesis; that the pseudonymous authors relate themselves to it is easy enough to see, if in no other way, then in their eye for the comic. The comic is always a sign of maturity...."¹⁴² Again, Climacus says, "By essentially existing *qua* human being, one also gains a responsiveness to the comic. I am not saying that everyone who actually exists as a human being is therefore able to be a comic poet or a comic actor, but he has a responsiveness to it."¹⁴³ One with inwardness has an eye for the contrast between that inwardness and externality. The greater one's eye for that contrast, the greater one's eye is for the comic contradiction inherent to existing.¹⁴⁴

The extent and degree of one's comic perception depends upon one's subjective relation to existence. The less one's normative inner state is in conformity with the norms of externality and worldliness, the more apparent the contrast with the world and the more evident the comic becomes amidst one's various relations.¹⁴⁵ The misrelation between inner and outer is essential to human perceptions of the comic, in Kierkegaard's understanding. Conversely, though, just as comic laughter can inculcate in one the norms required to find the event funny, so can one's discovery of the comic alert one to the contrastive relationship between inner and outer. That is, the comic rests in important

Inner and outer remain incommensurable, and that misrelation is an opportunity for the discovery of the comic.

¹⁴² *SKS* 7, 255-56 / *CUP* 1, 281.

¹⁴³ *SKS* 7, 277 / *CUP* 1, 304.

¹⁴⁴ "That is why it holds true without exception that the more competently a person exists, the more he will discover the comic" (*SKS* 7, 420 / *CUP* 1, 462).

¹⁴⁵ One begins to see how Kierkegaard could consider Christianity to be "the most humorous view of life in world-history" (*DD*:3 / *JP* 2, 1681) since he believes Christianity to be the least conformed to the expectations and understandings of the world.

ways upon the nature of human subjectivity and its misrelation to the external, and so the comic can draw one's attention to that fact, aiding the internalization of one's subjective state in existence. This is why Kierkegaard can say in his dissertation that irony is "the first...qualification of subjectivity"¹⁴⁶ and that "a life that may be called human begins with irony."¹⁴⁷ Kierkegaard believes that the comic and its forms train us in human existence.

To deny the incommensurability between the inner and outer, therefore, is to undercut one's ability to perceive and existentially benefit from the essentially comic. This is exactly what Kierkegaard thinks Hegelianism does. The Hegelians teach that "the outer is the inner and the inner the outer,"¹⁴⁸ and, to Kierkegaard's mind, such an equation undoes the comic, subjective and ethical development, and, ultimately, Christianity itself.¹⁴⁹ The Hegelian system advocates the direct relation to the world by undoing the contrast between inner and outer, thus smoothing out the essential contrast for cultivating subjectivity. As Climacus says, "The direct relationship with God is simply paganism, and only when the break has taken place, only then can there be a true God-relationship."¹⁵⁰ Again, he says, "[T]he direct relationship with God is esthetics and

¹⁴⁶ *SKS* 1, 302 / *CI*, 264.

¹⁴⁷ *SKS* 1, 65 / *CI*, 6.

¹⁴⁸ *SKS* 7, 58 / *CUP* 1, 54; *SKS* 7, 270.1 / *CUP* 1, 296n. Kierkegaard's antipathy for this Hegelian doctrine runs deep. As Mark C. Taylor notes (Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975], 338), Kierkegaard begins his first major pseudonymous work, and thus his official authorship, by writing, "It may at times have occurred to you, dear reader, to doubt somewhat the accuracy of that familiar philosophical thesis that the outer is the inner and the inner is the outer" (*SKS* 2, 11 / *EO* 1, 3).

¹⁴⁹ Westphal says, "It is only if we have resisted the speculative dissolution of the dialectical in the first place that the question of Christianity can meaningfully arise. And that resistance is what the long discussion of subjectivity as such [in *Postscript*] has been all about" (Westphal [1996], 175-76).

¹⁵⁰ *SKS* 7, 221 / *CUP* 1, 243.

is actually no relationship with God.”¹⁵¹ That the speculative philosophers pretend to a direct relationship with God is integrally related, then, to their lack of a sense for the comic. Abstract thinkers¹⁵² and assistant professors have a “shocking” lack of comic sense.¹⁵³ Hegel himself is even accused of being “utterly devoid of a sense for the comic.”¹⁵⁴ If the Hegelians lack a sense for the comic, they have failed both at being subjectively developed human beings and at being reliable guides to the nature of Christianity. Consequently, Merold Westphal finds in *Postscript* “the surprising charge the Hegelian speculation is insufficiently dialectical, since it flees the tensions of temporal existence for the relaxation of premature resolution.”¹⁵⁵ Hegel is not dialectical enough for Kierkegaard, who thinks that preserving the contrast between inner and outer is an essential element for avoiding the regrettable consequence of mediating Christianity away. The contrastive relation between inwardness and externality is most pointed for the religious person, for whom “a contradiction will appear as he relates himself to the world around him.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵¹ *SKS* 7, 509.1 / *CUP* 1, 560n.

¹⁵² *SKS* 7, 276 / *CUP* 1, 303.

¹⁵³ *SKS* 7, 256 / *CUP* 1, 281.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Westphal (1996), viii.

¹⁵⁶ *SKS* 7, 452 / *CUP* 1, 499. All inwardness contrasts with the external world. Religiousness has the additional contradiction of being the knight of hidden inwardness while appearing just like everyone else (*SKS* 7, 452-54 / *CUP* 1, 499-501).

Elsewhere, Kierkegaard has a pseudonym express the contradiction between the inner and the outer as “faith”: “But faith is the paradox that interiority is higher than exteriority.... The paradox of faith is that there is an interiority that is incommensurable with exteriority, an interiority that is not identical, please note, with the first but is a new interiority. This must not be overlooked. Recent philosophy has allowed itself simply to substitute the immediate for ‘faith’.... This puts faith in the rather commonplace company of feelings, moods, idiosyncracies, *vapeurs*, etc. ... But nothing justifies philosophy in using this language” (*SKS* 4, 161 / *FT* 69). This similarity (but not identity) with the comic is an important reason why the latter is propaedeutic to the former.

The Comic vs. Hegelian Mediation

Since speculative Hegelianism holds to an identity between the inner and outer and to a direct relation to God, the comic is Climacus' chosen opponent to Hegelianism. For one thing, the comic defends one from Hegelian mediation. Just as Climacus claims that the assistant professors are unable to mediate irony,¹⁵⁷ he claims that a sense for the comic is extremely helpful in extricating oneself from Hegelian thinking: "Presumably,

¹⁵⁷ SKS 7, 253.1 / CUP 1, 277n.

A note should be added about why Hegelian philosophy cannot mediate irony. Consider the two examples above of Hamlet and the soldier, which highlight the contrast between inner and outer by showing how human inwardness is ultimately incommensurable with the external world. This is one way in which the comic distinguishes between inner and outer, and one might say that it defends against mediation by highlighting the irreconcilability of human subjectivity with objective categories, which is the category that Climacus accuses Hegelianism of trying to exist in.

This is, however, not the only way that the comic can point to the distinction between inner and outer. Perhaps a more familiar example, using irony, is of one saying something while meaning something very different from the words spoken. For example, imagine some movie where near-certain doom seems sure to befall the heroes, and one of them quips, "Fantastic. Now we're all going to die." The character does not believe the turn of events to be fantastic at all, which is why his comment would be described as an ironic one. In this case, irony highlights the contrast between inner and outer as the misrelation to how one presents oneself in externally directed language and what he truly believes inwardly. The objective, direct language used cannot in any way capture what is intended, so the existence of a human subjectivity that is in misrelation with outward presentation is underscored by the irony. A Hegelian system, assimilating objective content, might be able to accommodate the character's directly spoken language, but, Climacus suggests, it would not be able to assimilate his ironic and subjective misrelation to the words spoken. That is, the most important part of the communication would go untouched.

This situation is especially true not, in the above example, where the irony is relatively clear since the jest so clearly dominates any possibility that he is earnestly approving of their doom that one might call it a kind of direct communication: "[I]f jest or earnestness completely dominates, it is direct communication" (SKS 12, 130 / PC, 125). Rather, a more truly ironic example from Kierkegaard's point of view is where it is *unclear* whether the spoken comment is to be taken as ironic or not. Consider someone softly giving voice to an idealized hope before a group of listeners and then abruptly stopping to say, "But one would have to be a fool to think something like that." The listeners have to decide how to interpret this comment. One option is that the speaker was succumbing to sentimentality or idealism, realized the foolishness of what he was saying, and then revoked it, sternly rebuking his own foolishness. Another option, however, is that the speaker earnestly believed his spoken hope and continues to so believe but, sensing disbelief or mockery from his listeners, immediately defends his inward hope by throwing up an ironic screen. In this interpretation, the speaker's subsequent comment is an ironic presentation of what he expects his listeners to be thinking. By giving voice to it in this way, though, the speaker is *distancing* himself from what is said and showing ironic contempt for those listeners who are so cynical as to mock his true hope. If the speaker's delivery contains his passion well and is delivered with skill, it may be very difficult indeed to determine whether his comment was an ironic one or not. Assuming the second option, the speaker's use of deftly delivered irony functions as an incognito for him, as discussed above. His delivery has kicked up a cloud of confusion, kept his inward earnestness safely with himself, and left the mockers with nothing but their own indeterminacy and questions. Such irony would be impossible for the Hegelian objectivists to mediate.

this continuous progress has also given rise to the misunderstanding that it takes a devil of a fellow in speculative thought to free himself from Hegelianism. Far from it; only sound common sense is needed, a pithy sense of the comic, a little Greek ataraxia.”¹⁵⁸ The comic both defends one against and rescues one from the processes of Hegelian mediation.

For another thing, because Hegelians do not discover the comic, they themselves become comic. Hegel himself is devoid of a sense for the comic,¹⁵⁹ and the Hegelian method cannot understand jest.¹⁶⁰ By failing to recognize the power of the comic, though, one does not defeat the comic but succumbs to it. One becomes ripe for comic judgment. It is in this sense that Climacus can refer to Hegel and Hegelianism as “a venture in the comic.”¹⁶¹ It is, in other words, comic fodder. Hegelian speculative thought abolishes the contradictions of life, running everything together “into one” and thinking it has vanquished mockery; however, Climacus gives warning: “But mockery avenges itself; it is so far from being locked out that one would rather think that speculative thought had locked itself in with it—so ludicrous has it become.”¹⁶² Hegelianism deserves such mockery since it becomes comic in various ways, such as by lulling one into forgetting that one is an existing individual,¹⁶³ by including a paragraph in the system that talks about “existence” while contradictorily annulling that existence

¹⁵⁸ *SKS* 7, 40.1 / *CUP* 1, 33n. One can imagine Kierkegaard himself using a similar response to rebut those who accuse him of remaining too Hegelian in his own thought.

¹⁵⁹ *SKS* 7, 256 / *CUP* 1, 281.

¹⁶⁰ *SKS* 7, 309 / *CUP* 1, 338.

¹⁶¹ *SKS* 7, 40.1 / *CUP* 1, 34n; *SKS* 7, 119 / *CUP* 1, 124.

¹⁶² *SKS* 7, 138 / *CUP* 1, 148.

¹⁶³ *SKS* 7, 116 / *CUP* 1, 120.

through concluding the system,¹⁶⁴ and by having to create longer and longer surveys of world history in an attempt to comprehend everything into a conclusive world-historical nutshell.¹⁶⁵ In each of these examples, Hegelianism does not recognize the appropriate comic contradictions of life for finite existing individuals, which include Hegelian scholars, and so, in attempting to make life a matter of mediated smoothness, it finds itself the victim of a new contradiction and thus the butt of comic laughter. The absurdities of Hegelianism can make it appear as a “prank,”¹⁶⁶ and when such a scholar wants to rearrange the categories of existence forcibly and disruptively, “then scholarship hands him over for comic treatment.”¹⁶⁷ The self-contradictions and confusions of Hegelian speculative philosophy compound themselves until, Climacus says, it begins to resemble the comic play, *Misunderstanding upon Misunderstanding*.¹⁶⁸

Such a situation deserves to be laughed at, he thinks. Climacus says that an enthusiastic youth who naïvely trusted Hegel and then discovered his error “has a right to demand the nemesis of having laughter consume in Hegel what laughter may legitimately claim as its own.”¹⁶⁹ Indeed, so eager is Climacus to see comic judgment overtake Hegel for the trouble his mediating system has caused that he imagines a scenario where Socrates encounters Hegel in the afterlife and, through personal inquiry, subjects the

¹⁶⁴ SKS 7, 117-8 / CUP 1, 122-23.

¹⁶⁵ SKS 7, 125 / CUP 1, 133-34.

¹⁶⁶ SKS 7, 140 / CUP 1, 151.

¹⁶⁷ SKS 7, 141 / CUP 1, 152.

¹⁶⁸ SKS 7, 193 / CUP 1, 210.

¹⁶⁹ SKS 7, 114 / CUP 1, 118. One wonders to what degree the situation of this enthusiastic youth could have described young Kierkegaard.

Hegelian system to incisive comic deconstruction.¹⁷⁰ The comic will claim its vengeance on those who, like the Hegelians, fail to give the comic its due or to recognize its authority.

A chastening note would be appropriate here. While Climacus (and Kierkegaard) finds many comic failures in Hegelianism, this position is not synonymous with finding nothing of worth whatsoever in these philosophical efforts. Kierkegaard himself was a student reared under Hegelian instruction and knew that its influence on him was more ambiguous than purely pernicious. Lippitt describes Climacus' attitude towards Hegelianism as "respectful contempt,"¹⁷¹ and Climacus does occasionally show that his relation to Hegelianism is more complex than that of utter ridicule. For example, in a passage discussing the tendency of systematizing philosophers to tend towards the absurdities of the objective point of view, Climacus says, "And in that regard one may laugh at him and, as is fitting, still have respect for his abilities, his learning, etc."¹⁷² It is like a talented dancer who can make high leaps, winning our admiration. However, should he want to convince us that he could fly, "let laughter overtake him. Leaping means to belong essentially to the earth and to respect the law of gravity so that the leap is merely the momentary, but flying means to be set free from telluric conditions...."¹⁷³ The talent itself deserves our sincere respect, but even a worthy talent can be put to

¹⁷⁰ *SKS* 7, 40.1-41.1 / *CUP* 1, 34n. This passage is also notable for Kierkegaard's brief tribute to his beloved professor, Poul Martin Møller, where it is recalled that Møller, thinking of Hegelianism, would briefly become indignant at first and then would "laugh at it heartily." It is fair to venture that Kierkegaard initially learned his tactic of opposing Hegelianism through the laughter of the comic from Møller.

¹⁷¹ Lippitt (2000), 23.

¹⁷² *SKS* 7, 120 / *CUP* 1, 125.

¹⁷³ *SKS* 7, 119 / *CUP* 1, 124.

foolish or laughable ends by pretending to be something it could never be. If an abstract thinker lacks the comic, it proves “that all his thinking is the feat of a perhaps outstanding talent but not of a human being who in an eminent sense has existed as a human being.”¹⁷⁴ It is the contradiction with his own existence that particularly warrants the laughter of comic judgment.

For Climacus, then, the comic serves as an excellent means of opposing Hegelianism—or, indeed, any speculative philosophy that would make pretense to an objectivity that no finitely existing individuals could ever attain. The comic, based in contradiction, is ideal to point out the fissures in life that Hegelian mediation would seek to paper over or to combine through an illegitimate logical legerdemain. Comic laughter exposes the outlandish claims of Hegelianism as implausible for actual human beings. By denying the contradictions of human life, Hegelianism becomes a contradiction itself. By failing to find the comic where it is, it inadvertently becomes a new source of comic laughter. The implication is that if one discovers the comic contradiction of the Hegelian system, one has found a crack through which one may escape from the sealed process of Hegelian mediation. The comic rescues one from becoming absorbed wholly into the system.¹⁷⁵ Since Hegelianism takes itself so seriously, with its outlandish claims for its own powers and accomplishments, comic laughter comes as an especially unanticipated and, thus, effective blow to its supposedly faultless edifice. Climacus observes how odd

¹⁷⁴ *SKS* 7, 276 / *CUP* 1, 303.

¹⁷⁵ “Here, then, a laughter of non-discursive dismissal can liberate us from this sense of feeling obliged to argue against the System on its own terms, and free us to continue with our project of ‘becoming subjective’, without the need for further, potentially stultifying, argument and rebuttal” (Lippitt [2000], 22).

it is that the system of Hegelian philosophy gave such an important aesthetic role to the comic since it “of all philosophies was least able to stand a blow from that corner.”¹⁷⁶

Having the Comic Inside vs. Outside of Oneself

The discussion of Hegelianism’s becoming a “comic venture” by being found ludicrous by the comic brings us to Climacus’ terminology of having the comic “inside” oneself versus having the comic “outside” oneself. For example, Climacus says that immediacy has the comic outside itself, while irony and humor have the comic within themselves.¹⁷⁷ What does Climacus mean by this positional relation to the comic? Evans has a helpful discursus on this issue, rightly relating it to one’s relative position within the stages of existence:

The stages are ranked in this connection by Climacus according to their relation to “the contradiction” between the infinite and the finite which makes up the comical element in existence. The aesthetic or immediate consciousness “has the comical outside itself.” This means that the aesthete is himself comical but is not conscious of this; hence the comical is “outside” his consciousness. The ironist and the ethicist both have the comical *within* themselves, though the ethicist does not dwell on this. Since he is an exister, he has no time for such contemplation, hence “only sees the comical as constantly vanishing.” Humor also has the comical within itself and is “justified against everything which is not religiousness.” The religious individual is higher still; by virtue of the passion in his God-relationship he is inaccessible to comic apprehension. Religiousness has the comical “within it as something lower,” and thus it is “by means of the comical secured against the comical”....¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ SKS 7, 464-65 / CUP 1, 512-13.

¹⁷⁷ SKS 7, 473-74 / CUP 1, 521.

¹⁷⁸ Evans 1999, 196. Cf. Lippitt 2000, 97-98. Evans offers a conveniently brief overview of Kierkegaard’s stages of existence:

“It is of course a well-known thesis of Kierkegaard’s that there are three stages or spheres of existence. The aesthetic life is the natural or immediate kind of life in which everyone begins, where one simply attempts to satisfy one’s natural desires or urges. The aesthete lives for the moment. The ethical life is the life in which one grasps the significance of the eternal and by ethical resolve attempts to transcend one’s natural desires and create a unified life. The religious life is the life in which one recognizes the impossibility of actualizing the eternal through positive action and instead attempts to grasp it through repentance and suffering” (Evans [2006], 86-87). The addition to this schema of irony and humor as two border territories among the three stages of existence will be discussed below.

My thesis is in large agreement with Evans' account, though I will seek to draw out some additional points in light of the discussion above.

Recall that Climacus defines the comic as being contradiction.¹⁷⁹ When Climacus locates one relative to "the comic," then, this means more specifically that one is located relative to the place where the conflicting elements of the comic converge to clash. Where the contradiction is found is where "the comic" is. So, if the contradiction is internal to one's subjective consciousness, then one has the comic "inside" oneself and is able to perceive it, existentially transcending any final pain. If the contradiction is between one's subjectivity and some other external element, then one has the comic "outside" oneself, and one may not even be aware that one stands in such contradiction at all.

"Higher" Norms Subvert "Lower" Norms, Giving Rise to Existential Motion

Further, recall that in the previous discussion of the contradiction of the comic, it was specified that the contradiction must involve the subversion of one of the elements (or "norms") and not just any conflict among roughly equally-balanced forces. In the comic contradiction, there is victory and loss, ascendancy and subordination, however trivial.¹⁸⁰ Two norms in conflict typically do not end on equal footing, lest the comic

¹⁷⁹ *SKS* 7, 465-66 / *CUP* 1, 514.

¹⁸⁰ One could also say that the comic has "direction" or "movement." Recalling that the comic is composed of contradiction, consider Climacus' claim that concerning "the immanent forward thrust of contradiction" (*SKS* 7, 321 / *CUP* 1, 351). It becomes clear that the comic contradiction provokes one to "take sides" regarding norms involved in the contradiction, so to speak, which gives rise to the movement. One's expectations, hermeneutic evaluation, or perspective on what norm is truly normative will often shift in a good instance of the comic.

Consider the following lines from Steven Wright: "I have a hobby. I have the world's largest collection of sea shells. I keep it scattered on beaches all over the world. Maybe you've seen it." As Wright begins his tale, innocuously explaining his hobby to the audience, we sympathetically listen to him,

become ambiguous and even indiscernibly comic at all. The clash is felt against an established norm, which either remains victorious against the claimant to the throne or is subverted by it. To continue Climacus' spatial imagery, the "higher" norm subverts the "lower."¹⁸¹ If, in the structure of any given comic example, one identifies with the lower norm, then one's position is being subverted by the comic contradiction. If one identifies with the higher norm in the same comic contradiction, though, one survives the clash. This asymmetrical contradiction is intuitively understood by people who use forms of the comic, often sarcasm or irony, to undercut another position or person that is understood to be absurd or worthy of critique. The "lower" norm, subverted in the contradiction, is the butt of the comic laughter.

Certainly, such a situation may lend itself to the use of comic forms for purposes of cruelty or social abuse. It need not be seen in a necessarily cruelly dominating way, however. It may be liberating. For example, take Climacus' comically subverting the increasingly culturally dominant assumption that one can attain an implausible

perhaps even admiring him for a moment for his impressive accomplishment at collecting so many sea shells. Soon enough, though, the whole thing is revealed to be an absurdity. Because his bold claim, and the immense effort implied by it, is found to be in contradiction with the reality that he has expended no such effort after all but merely resorts to definitional contortions about what constitutes a "collection" or "ownership" thereof, Wright himself takes on a comic aspect. What initially appeared to be a serious claim is soon dissolved by a new norm that perceives that he, in fact, makes outlandish claims that cannot be justified. His persona is to present his observation as a bland fact, so Wright strikes the audience as a little crazy, since, as he presents himself, he seems not to recognize the absurdity of his own claims, something plainly obvious to everyone else. It is all in good fun, of course, and the audience delights in Wright's willingness and ability to place himself in a comic aspect.

¹⁸¹ This insight sheds some light into contemporary theories about the comic. For example, Morreall gives three traditional theories explaining comic laughter: the superiority theory, the incongruity theory, and the relief theory (Morreall, 4-37). Kierkegaard, with his locating the comic in contradiction, would be a representative of the incongruity theory of the comic, but our close reading of Climacus' account may clarify things further. Because Kierkegaard's understanding of comic contradiction implies that some norms get subverted by other norms, the "superiority" theory of comic laughter may be seen, not as a competing theory, but as an explanation that is in fact based in incongruity. In fact, Climacus' description of the comic as being essentially painless because of having a "way out" may also account for the Freudian "relief" theory of comic laughter. Climacus' account is a model that may be able to explain the competing models as well.

objectivity. Or, consider prisoners of war ridiculing their captors. In other words, the power imbalance of a particular comic example does not necessarily have to parallel a power imbalance in human relations as when the strong pick on the weak. Rather, it may be a means for the weak to gain greater equality by dislodging the superiorly strong. Nor does comic critique necessarily result in political change. Friends fairly regularly subject one another to playful comic critique, but they remain peers because usually sooner or later everyone has his turn. If one individual is too frequently or too harshly singled out for amusement or ridicule, resentment may build up since the peer status is threatened.

The Comic Contradiction in Relation to the Stages of Existence

That in any given comic instance, a higher norm can be found to subvert a lower norm helps to explain why Kierkegaard considers the comic to play such an important transitional role in his stages of existence. While some accounts of the stages of existence become fairly complex,¹⁸² for clarity's sake we will consider the more common and simplified account of the stages of existence or "existence-spheres": there are three stages, namely the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious, and between the first two stages lies the *confinium* or "border territory" of irony, and between the last two stages lies the *confinium* of humor.¹⁸³ Note that irony and humor are not given "stages" of their own; rather they serve as either barriers or transition points between existence stages,

¹⁸² E.g., *SKS* 7, 483.1 / *CUP* 1, 531n-532n.

¹⁸³ *SKS* 7, 455 / *CUP* 1, 501-2. I add that while "irony" is located between the aesthetic and ethical stages and "humor" is located between the ethical and religious stages, I believe that this schema locates where Kierkegaard thinks irony and humor *essentially* belong, not *exclusively* belong. That is, I believe elements or examples of both irony and humor can be found outside of these border territory locations, even if this is their proper home, strictly speaking. Cf. the discussion of "slot" and "range" at Evans (1999), 201.

proper. There is something about these forms of the comic that Kierkegaard finds makes them especially effective as transitional elements between types of existence.

My argument aims to clarify how the comic can be transitional,¹⁸⁴ rather than just fruitless laughter. The comic composition of norms in contradiction, with a higher norm subverting the lower norm, corresponds to Kierkegaard's stages of existence. The stages are non-continuous with one another, so there is a contradiction where the aesthetic meets the higher stage of the ethical and where the ethical meets the higher stage of the religious. This contradiction requires an existential "leap" or transition between the discontinuous modes of existence, and the comic is what is existentially discovered at these places of contradiction. Transition across this gap of non-continuity would be difficult to envision were it not for the comic, functioning as one's existential capacity for transition.

¹⁸⁴ This is *contra* Westphal, who says that it is not "as boundary zones or as transitional stages that Climacus focuses on irony and humor" but rather as "disguises" or forms of incognito (Westphal (1996), 165). Certainly, Climacus shows great interest on irony and humor as existential disguises for the ethicist and the religious person, respectively, but to downplay Climacus' focus on the comic as transitional overlooks an essential part of what he is arguing in *Postscript*. In fact, several of Westphal's own observations come to the aid of my argument. For example, his remark that Climacus' treatment of "irony and humor inevitably gives rise to thoughts of sin and repentance" and so leads the way to his discussion of guilt (putting aside for the moment Westphal's adverb, "inevitably") certainly sounds like an affirmation of the transitional virtue of these comic forms to a higher stage of existence (Ibid., 169). Again, Westphal argues that it is "the difference between human performance and the 'absolute criterion'" that allows guilt consciousness to arise and to be seen as an existential truth (171). But, as I will note below, humor is essential to pointing out the failures of human ethical performance and so preparing the way to transitioning into the religious. Again, then, the comic is shown to lie at the locus of transition.

Climacus' account of the role of the comic in the stages of existence is not most essentially interested in giving a retrospective summation of the function of the comic as incognito for one who has already attained the Christian religious. For Kierkegaard, Denmark is not as subjectively far along as it thinks it is. Climacus' account, then, is existentially interested, providing a roadmap of subjective development for those who have not yet attained the religious or even the ethical. It wants to incite development and appropriation, not coolly summarize how the trail appears to one who has passed this way in a former time. Recall that Climacus himself is a humorist who has not yet attained the religious in his own subjective growth. He still has room for struggle and growth himself, and existence still holds adventures for him. From this perspective, if one is weighing the relative importance of the comic as transitional vs. the comic as incognito in *Postscript*, not only is the former as significant as the latter, it may well be more significant.

For example, tension and conflict is felt when the aesthetic manner of living is brought into connection with the ethical manner of living, and “irony” is the form of the comic that Kierkegaard uses to describe the beginnings of subjective development out of the immediacy of aestheticism.¹⁸⁵ Aesthetic immediacy, which draws one sensually outside of oneself, so to speak, is in contradiction with the ethical desire to transcend the natural desires through development of one’s inner selfhood. Also, the multiplicity and variation of the aesthetic life (for example, the life that ever succumbs to the transient mood of the moment) is in contradiction with the steady unity that is found in the ethical. For example, in *Either/Or*, the aestheticism of Johannes the Seducer is contrasted with the ethical Judge William’s channeling the unstable passions of love into the unified dedication of marriage. Irony is located at the transition point between these two ways of existing. Far more than a mere verbal or literary style, then, irony is “the first...qualification of subjectivity,”¹⁸⁶ and “no genuinely human life is possible without irony.”¹⁸⁷ Irony is the means of existential transition from the aesthetic to the ethical life.

When the ethical life is achieved and the norms of terrestrial accomplishments are held to be all, though, a higher set of norms, God’s norms, come to relativize and expose

¹⁸⁵ SKS 7, 456-57 / CUP 1, 503-4. As Evans puts it, “*Irony represents the discovery of the self as distinct from a cultural ensemble*. It is therefore described as separative...” (Evans [1999], 195. Emphasis original).

In his dissertation, Kierkegaard is keen to defend irony’s value for subjective development against Hegel’s denigration of it: “[I]t must be said that by his one-sided attack on the post-Fichtean irony [Hegel] has overlooked the truth of irony, and by his identifying all irony with this, he has done irony an injustice” (SKS 1, 303 / CI, 265). Kierkegaard also expresses complete agreement with one commentator on Hegel, Heinrich Gustav Hotho, who had said, “Equally at home with jest and cheer, he [Hegel] nevertheless remained partly impervious to the ultimate depths of humor, and the most recent form of irony stood in such stark contrast to his own orientation that he completely lacked the wherewithal with which to recognize or appreciate what was genuine in it” (SKS 1, 335 / CI, 302).

¹⁸⁶ SKS 1, 302 / CI, 264.

¹⁸⁷ SKS 1, 355 / CI, 326.

the false and failing claims of the ethical. Before God, despite all nobility of aim and every attempt to get it right, all personal effort¹⁸⁸ and even marriage¹⁸⁹ is but a jest, a trifle. It turns out that the highest in this life is but a prank,¹⁹⁰ and humor is the form of the comic that transitions us into eventually perceiving and holding norms, divine norms, that are higher than ourselves. Humor teaches us that everyone advances equally far in the end,¹⁹¹ and that the various social estimations of accomplishment are proved empty. This is because, to give one reason, all humans exist under a condition of total guilt before God so that the relative differences of life (intelligence, talent, wealth, life span, political connections, effectiveness, etc.) are useless “hustle-bustle” that do not finally advance us any farther.¹⁹²

Thus, while the ethical made a higher discovery than the aesthetic, finding the higher norm in a concentrated and subjectively developed self fueled by irony, the religious makes a still higher discovery than the ethical with the aid of humor, finding an infinitely high norm in the most high God to be in contradiction with our own supposedly ethical selves. Self-reliance cannot be the final word in a universe created through divine grace. With the aid of the gatekeeper humor, which uses the immanent against itself to

¹⁸⁸ SKS 7, 79 / CUP 1, 78.

¹⁸⁹ SKS 7, 413-14 / CUP 1, 455-56.

¹⁹⁰ SKS 7, 161 / CUP 1, 175.

¹⁹¹ SKS 7, 409 / CUP 1, 450.

¹⁹² SKS 7, 504 / CUP 1, 554-55. Here, one is likely seeing the influence of humility and the instinct towards fundamental human equality from Hamann’s use of humor. For example, amidst the polemics and notes of comic interest in his *Socratic Memorabilia*, Hamann can say, “He who does not know how to live on crumbs and alms nor on prey, or to renounce everything for a sword, is not fit for the service of truth” (James C. O’Flaherty, *Hamann’s Socratic Memorabilia: A Translation and Commentary* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967], 143).

show its insufficiency¹⁹³, we discover that our earnest hope lies in God now, not in ourselves.¹⁹⁴

While the comic marks important points of transition for Kierkegaard, it should be noted that he does not believe there to be any necessity in this advancement of subjectivity. The stages of existence are possible existential modes to actualize, but there is no predetermined reason that one will advance through all of them at a certain rate or, indeed, at all.¹⁹⁵ In contrast to Hegel, whose account of the unfolding of reason latent in the structures of reality means an inexorable advancement through the stages of history that follows “the inner necessity of nature and history,” in Taylor’s words,¹⁹⁶ Kierkegaard looks toward the advancement of an individual through the stages of subjective existence that may or may not come to fruition. The transitional function of the comic for Kierkegaard, then, is not sure or unidirectional. The comic may fail to instantiate new, better norms in the auditor. Moreover, it may succeed in instantiating worse norms in the

¹⁹³ “[H]umor terminates immanence within immanence...and only then do faith and the paradoxes begin.... Humor is not faith but is before faith...” (*SKS* 7, 265 / *CUP* 1, 291).

¹⁹⁴ To be clear, in Climacus’ schema, humor transitions one between the ethical and the religious, but Climacus further subdivides the category “the religious” into religiousness A and B. As Evans notes, there is some complexity in the relationship between religiousness A and B, but it could be said in short that religiousness A describes a religion of immanence that is the proper subject of natural theology while only religiousness B is proper Christianity, being not the achievement of humanity’s natural faculties but a paradoxical religion outside of full human understanding that is delivered to humanity through divine revelation (Evans [1999] 137, 147-48). Climacus’ account of the relationship between humor and the categorical subdivisions of religiousness is not always as clear as one might hope, and my account is not interested in considering the finer points of this particular complexity. In the name of simplicity, since Climacus describes both religiousness A and religiousness B under the category of “the religious,” I will follow that terminology here. It should be kept in mind, however, that while Climacus’ language of “the religious” has the possibility of including types of religiousness that are outside of Christianity proper, it is Christianity that is the preeminent example of “the religious” for him, and all discussions of religiousness are made in relation to that supreme type.

¹⁹⁵ “What makes any stage the ‘next’ one in relation to some other stage is not some normal pattern of psychological development or some necessity of conceptual entailment but the value judgment that makes one stage the proper sphere for relativizing the other” (Westphal [1996], 25). See also Evans (1999), 186.

¹⁹⁶ Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 215.

auditor and so be pejoratively formative. Such would be an illegitimate use of the comic, in Kierkegaard's schema, but it is an existential possibility. For example, an aesthete might comically ridicule an ethicist as a boring stooge, a societal conformist who has "sold out" to the power handlers, even while the aesthete does not realize that his ridicule maintains him in a lower stage of existence. Reality holds such an aesthete up for comic judgment, whether he realizes it or not. His attempted use of the comic against the ethical is illegitimate, whereas a humorist, being higher, might be able to make legitimate hay of the ethicist's misguided earnestness.

Therefore, because the higher subverts the lower, and the stages of existence are arranged hierarchically for Kierkegaard, a higher stage of existence can never truly be made comic by a lower stage. This means that the truly religious, the highest stage of existence, can never truly be made comic by anything else. The religious is defended against the comic and is "inaccessible for comic interpretation."¹⁹⁷ It is true, of course, that one may be able to locate the comic in a misguided or warped form of the religious, such as when Climacus mentions reflecting on the comic effect of a religious discourse that satirizes itself without knowing it¹⁹⁸ or the bombastic revivalists who should be given over to the treatment of irony¹⁹⁹ because of their comically self-contradictory arrogation.²⁰⁰ Indeed, even the extremely earnest matter of repentance from sin may be "interpreted as comic," but only after true repentance has been degraded into a farce

¹⁹⁷ *SKS* 7, 474 / *CUP* 1, 522.

¹⁹⁸ *SKS* 7, 442.1 / *CUP* 1, 487n.

¹⁹⁹ *SKS* 7, 514 / *CUP* 1, 565.

²⁰⁰ *SKS* 7, 515 / *CUP* 1, 567.

through the medieval practice of selling indulgences.²⁰¹ That is, an aesthetically false repentance may be made comic, whereas a genuine repentance never could be.²⁰² The truly religious can never be found comic, since “everything serves and obeys” the religious, including the comic.²⁰³

The reason this is so is that the religious, which *Postscript* describes as “hidden inwardness,” does not have the requisite outwardness to come into contradiction with anything, so the religious cannot have the comic “outside itself.”²⁰⁴ The religious cannot be subverted in the comic contradiction, cannot be made comic fodder. Instead, the religious individual, rather than having a self-confidence that continually comes into contradiction with reality as a good ethicist would, has come through the lessons of humor and has seen the self-contradiction and futility that imbues the fallen human situation. The religious individual has surrendered hope of building eternal castles in this world and has repented of his own participation in and contribution to this fallen order. He has a new norm, having taken the contradiction of human existence and internalized it in his consciousness, simultaneously internalizing the comic, which is found at the locus of contradiction. Climacus says that religiousness “has itself brought into consciousness

²⁰¹ *SKS* 7, 476-77 / *CUP* 1, 524.

²⁰² It should be noted that Climacus’ account distinguishes between causing something to “appear” comic or ludicrous and causing something in fact to be ludicrous. The comic for Kierkegaard is always about more than simple subjective taste since he believes it participates in a structure of subjective human development that was established by God. As long as there is a God, how could the truth of any matter be reduced to pure human subjectivity? Thus, Climacus’ discussion of the comic makes frequent reference to whether a comic aspect is “legitimate” or not. On being vs. appearing ludicrous, Climacus says, “The lower can never make the higher comic, that is, cannot legitimately interpret the higher as comic and does not have the power to make it comic. It is quite another matter that the lower, by being joined to the higher, can make the relation ludicrous. Thus a horse can be the occasion for a man to look ludicrous, but the horse does not have the power to make him ludicrous” (*SKS* 7, 472 / *CUP* 1, 519-20).

²⁰³ *SKS* 7, 474 / *CUP* 1, 522.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

the contradiction that humor dominates, the highest range of the comic, and has it within itself as something lower.”²⁰⁵ Even the highest range of the comic, humor, is internalized by the religious as something lower, so the lower forms of the comic must also be so internalized. Religiousness contains the comic in a way that no other manner of existing can.²⁰⁶

Higher Stages of Existence Retain and Recontextualize Lower Stages

Permit the discussion to pause a moment in order to clarify the relation of higher stages of existence to lower ones. While it might be thought that higher stages of existence are finished with the confines and mistakes of the past and so transcend them, leaving the lower stages entirely behind in abandonment—after all, for example, what use could the ethicist have for aestheticism?—in fact, Kierkegaard’s understanding is that the higher stages still retain but recontextualize the lower stages. Think of Judge William’s efforts to convince the aesthete of the “Esthetic Validity of Marriage,” and so show how the ethical life relocates the erotic passions of aestheticism into a better home.²⁰⁷ It is not that the aesthetic is obliterated but that it no longer claims its norming privileges and must become relativized by the higher.²⁰⁸ In this, it is important to recall Kierkegaard’s

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ One is reminded of Kierkegaard’s comment that Christianity is “the most humorous view of life in world-history” (DD:3 / JP 2, 1681).

²⁰⁷ “So you see the nature of the task I have set for myself: to show that romantic love can be united with and exist in marriage—indeed, that marriage is its true transfiguration” (SKS 3, 38-39 / EO2, 31).

²⁰⁸ “Consequently, the ethical is posited by the absolute choice, but it by no means follows that the esthetic is excluded. In the ethical, the personality is brought into a focus in itself; consequently, the esthetic is absolutely excluded or it is excluded as the absolute, but relatively it is continually present. In choosing itself, the personality chooses itself ethically and absolutely excludes the esthetic; but since he nevertheless chooses himself and does not become another being by choosing himself but becomes himself, all the esthetic returns in its relativity” (SKS 3, 173/ EO2, 177).

Hegelian influences, and one can detect a process similar to *Aufhebung* that has been adapted to Kierkegaard's model of subjective, rather than objective, development.²⁰⁹

Such a relationship obtains not only for the stages qua stages but also for the lower forms of the comic in reference to higher stages—even the religious. Evans notes the preservation of irony in higher stages,²¹⁰ and Mark C. Taylor comments on the continuing function of the humorous in Christianity.²¹¹ Climacus, despite being very clear that it is humor and not irony that borders the religious stage of existence, is unafraid to speak of the religious person using irony. For example, he says, “Viewed religiously, the distinction ‘fortune/misfortune’ may be used, but only jestingly and ironically....”²¹² Again, he says that the religious speaker “should be even swifter than the poet in making everyone as fortunate as he desires, but, please note, ironically, in order to show that all this fortune is extraneous....”²¹³

Since, in Kierkegaard's development, the higher still contains and recontextualizes the lower, it may be helpful to think of the spatial metaphor of “higher”

²⁰⁹ “[T]he aesthetic is not repudiated or annihilated in the ethical but ennobled and transfigured. The structure of this dialectical dethronement is pure Hegel. It is what he understands by *Aufhebung*. X is *aufgehoben* in Y when X is recontextualized, so that instead of standing by itself as self-sufficient, it belongs to Y, a wider frame of reference of which it is not the first principle. In its original solipsism it was of absolute import, but now it is only of relative significance. It has its place, to be sure, but it has been put in its place as well. Its dialectical tension consists in being very important but not all-important” (Westphal [1996], 25).

²¹⁰ “Irony is, like the ethical itself, not destroyed but preserved as the individual progresses existentially. Hence Climacus, who describes himself as a humorist, employs irony in abundance and for much the same reasons as Socrates” (Evans [1999], 194).

²¹¹ “The important differences between humor and Christianity should not overshadow the significance of the positive relation between them.... Although each stage represents a distinctive life-view, the movement from one to another does not involve the abolition of the antecedent stage.... Consequently humor continues to play an important role in the life of the Christian” (Mark C. Taylor [1980], 226).

²¹² *SKS* 7, 397 / *CUP* 1, 436.

²¹³ *SKS* 7, 400 / *CUP* 1, 440.

and “lower” stages as being “wider” and “narrower.” In other words, the higher stages effectively contain the lower stages inside of them, so it could be useful to think of the “highest” stage as the widest, outer sphere that encompasses all of the smaller concentric spheres within it.²¹⁴ This way, the earlier stages are not left below and abandoned but are taken up into a more comprehensive and more fully human manner of existing.

Religion, then, is the highest or “widest” existence sphere, and it contains all forms of the comic “inside” it. Consequently, the comic is never “outside” of the religious in order to discover some contradiction between the religious and a reality that could subvert the religious, holding it up for comic ridicule.²¹⁵ The religious is defended against the comic by containing the comic within it.

The Comic Border Territories Understood as Barriers

Since a higher stage of existence always retains the lower within it, what, one may ask, keeps the individual from slipping back into a lower mode of existence? Regression is prevented precisely by the element that enabled the transitions in the first place: the comic. That the comic forms of irony and humor qualify as “border territories” means both that they can help to effect transition among stages and that they can function as barriers that prevent such motion. It often functions, Climacus seems to think, to prevent degenerating motion that causes one to backslide into lower modes of existence that remain within one’s existential resources.

²¹⁴ It is because of this comprehensive nature of the stages, I argue, that Kierkegaard will occasionally be found describing his “stages” of existence as “spheres.” E.g., NB25:37 / JP 4, 4476.

²¹⁵ For a discussion of the various stages and to the relation of the comic as being inside or outside of them, see SKS 7, 472-74 / CUP 1, 520-22.

Consider Climacus' comments on the ethicist: "In order not to be disturbed by the finite, by all the relativities of the world, the ethicist places the comic between himself and the world and thereby makes sure that he himself does not become comic through a naïve misunderstanding of his ethical passion."²¹⁶ The ethicist places the comic between himself and the world to function as a stopper that seals off any ethical advancement he has made. Were he not to do this, the ethicist himself, by failing to take proper comic precautions, would himself become comic and appear ludicrous from his incoherent and inconsistent life. Indeed, he might become an "immediate enthusiast," whose swaggering extensiveness in the world is vulnerable to ridicule from the ironist.²¹⁷ In such a way, the ethicist who is, properly speaking, higher than the ironist could sink below the ironist and be vulnerable to his comic barbs. Despite the insufficiencies of the ironic lifestyle, a full-blown ironist has more consistency and character within him than a so-called ethicist who sinks down into enthusiastic immediacy. The proper ethicist, though, causes the comic to intervene between himself and the multiplicity of the world in order to retain the singular focus of his character on the ethical. He has found the "way out" of the existential contradictions, and his maintenance of the comic keeps him mindful of the contradictions inherent to his lower and former way of existing and of his gratefulness in having come out of it to a better place. From his vantage, he can see the contradictions that once were not apparent but now seem all too clear. A manner of existing that once held normative power for one now appears ludicrous from a vantage that can see its contradiction with the world. It has been supplanted by a new norm of existence. One retains a comic

²¹⁶ *SKS* 7, 457 / *CUP* 1, 504.

²¹⁷ *SKS* 7, 457-58 / *CUP* 1, 504-5.

superiority, so to speak, over former ways of existing, and the comic judgment of one's former mistakes enervates any temptation to regress.

A similar comment could be made concerning the religious individual's self-protection through use of the comic as a barrier, although the ethicist primarily uses irony to form this protective barrier, and the religious individual primarily uses humor. Since religiousness has humor within itself as something lower,²¹⁸ and humor is higher than the ethical stage of existence, the religious individual thrusts humor in between himself and the ethical in order to keep himself from degenerating into something lower. Therefore, humor, like irony, must have a polemical cast of some kind. One is reminded of two of Kierkegaard's previously discussed journal entries: "Humor by definition becomes a polemical factor in the Christian view of life,"²¹⁹ and, "[T]he comic has the polemical as a necessary element."²²⁰ In irony's case, which works to extract a subjective individual out from his multifarious environment, the polemical cast is often a sharp "I am right vs. everyone/everything else who is wrong." Humor, though, has learned the lessons of the universality of sin and the failure of finite efforts, however passionate, in this world. It cannot be so naïvely confident of the victories of the "I" where everyone else has failed. Humor, rather, emphasizes the commonality of the human condition. One might think that this necessitates humor to be at least much less polemical and probably not polemical at all. This is not the case. There is much to polemicize against when few recognize the truth of the fundamental equality of the human condition before God. Any social

²¹⁸ *SKS* 7, 474 / *CUP* 1, 522.

²¹⁹ *Pap.* III B 11 / *JP* 2, 1729.

²²⁰ *Pap.* III B 7 / *JP* 2, 1726.

distinctions might be ripe for humorous polemics, for example.²²¹ Anyone, such as the revivalists, who erroneously think that existential matters can be communicated directly and that God can be seen directly in everything, since they confidently have God in their pocket,²²² are ripe for humorous polemics because they live in contradiction to the true majesty and sovereignty of God who exists above mere mortals. Rather than “I am right vs. everyone/everything else who is wrong,” then, humorous polemics would more often take the form of “We are all in the wrong vs. those who do not yet recognize or live this truth.”²²³ In any case, the polemical aspect to the comic helps it to function as a barrier or stopper, preventing a developed subjectivity from existential retreat to lower levels, where one’s living contradictorily makes one comic. Thus, despite their differences, both the ethical life and the religious life can be said to be “protected by the comic against the comic.”²²⁴

²²¹ In a very early journal entry, Kierkegaard describes as “humorous” the self-assertion and supposed greatness of the mighty in the world in distinction to the Christian truth, which of course knows of the universal fallen state of humanity and its universal need for divine grace. These kings and princes, enemies of Christianity, “appeared to be nothing and to be laughable because of their opinions of their own greatness” (*Pap. I A 207 / JP 2*, 1674). Thus, the presence of the Christian doctrine of universal sin does not undercut the possibility of humor but provides the very grounding that makes it possible. When total guilt has the final word, any confidence placed in the foolish distinctions of the world must have a comical—and polemical—aspect (*SKS 7*, 504 / *CUP 1*, 554-55).

²²² *SKS 7*, 458 / *CUP 1*, 505. Climacus says, “Against arrogating forms of the religious, humor legitimately uses the comic because a religious person surely must himself know the way out if he only is willing” (*SKS 7*, 475 / *CUP 1*, 523).

²²³ Note that this is exactly how Climacus, as a humorist, argues polemically against the philosophical elites of his day. Climacus does not try to dethrone them from above, claiming to be a superior intelligence or a more excellent ethical example or a purer Christian witness. Rather, he dethrones them from below, using his humor to remind his self-important targets that they are only human, as we all are. As Climacus says, even an honored professor has to admit that he exists in time when he draws his salary every three months (*SKS 7*, 176 / *CUP 1*, 192). So far is Climacus from dethroning them from above that he asserts he has no miracle or indeed anything exceedingly important that could satisfy the demand of the times; rather he is a leisurely fellow who likes to smoke his cigar and who is markedly characterized by his indolence (*SKS 7*, 170-71 / *CUP 1*, 184-86). Climacus does not even try to pretend that he escapes the common condition of humanity and is satisfied with being “a plain, ordinary human being like most people” (*SKS 7*, 560 / *CUP 1*, 617).

²²⁴ *SKS 7*, 474 / *CUP 1*, 522.

The Comic is Present “Everywhere”

It has been argued that Kierkegaard’s conception of the comic has an intimate relationship to his conception of the hierarchy of the stages of human existence, with irony placed essentially between the aesthetic and the ethical and with humor placed essentially between the ethical and the religious. Climacus, however, says that the comic “is present everywhere,”²²⁵ so how is this to be understood in relation to the previous discussion?

That the comic is present “everywhere” is not a confusion for the stages because each stage has a different relation to that comic ubiquity. As he says, “On the whole, the comic is present everywhere, and every existence can at once be defined and assigned to its particular sphere by knowing how it is related to the comic.”²²⁶ This is what Climacus means by saying, “The comic is present in every stage of life (*except that the position is different*)”²²⁷ and by his language of having the comic inside or outside of oneself. Of course, since each stage has a different relation to the comic, this is another way of saying that each stage has a different degree of perception to the contradiction of existence, including both where it finds that contradiction and how deep it estimates it to run. Such differences in regards to contradiction determine their ranking. Climacus details the relations of the stages to contradiction:

The various existence-communications in turn take their rank in relation to the interpretation of existing.... *Immediacy, the esthetic*, finds no contradiction in existing; to exist is one thing, contradiction is something else that comes from

²²⁵ SKS 7, 420 / CUP 1, 462.

²²⁶ Ibid. Otani argues that the character and placement of the existence spheres are determined by their relation to the comic, which would make the comic not just diagnostic for the stages but constructive of them (Otani, 232).

²²⁷ SKS 7, 465 / CUP 1, 513. Italics original.

without. *The ethical* finds contradiction but within self-assertion. *Religiousness A* comprehends contradiction as suffering in self-annihilation, yet within immanence; but, ethically accentuating existing, it hinders the existing person in abstractly remaining in immanence or in becoming abstract by wanting to remain in immanence. The *paradoxical-religious* breaks with immanence and makes existing the absolute contradiction—not within immanence but in opposition to immanence. There is no immanent underlying kinship between the temporal and the eternal, because the eternal itself has entered into time and wants to establish kinship there.²²⁸

For example, then, it is no compliment to the aesthete that he finds no contradiction in existing, since this testifies to his own lack of character and inability to perceive any significant contrast between his inner self and the external world. The only contradictions he can detect are incidental contradictions that come from without. This also means that he has no understanding of the comic in its nature but only of fleeting moments that may have an amusing aspect in one way or another. Life cannot be essentially comical if there is no essential contradiction. Life can be titillating for him but not truly comical in the healthy mature sense that sees both the contradiction of life and the way out. The aesthete is so blinded that he is not conscious of a problem or contradiction with existence that would even need a way out. As the stages progress, the contradiction is found to be increasingly fundamental, located in self-assertion, in immanence itself, and, ultimately, between the divine eternal and immanence. Contradiction is not something that one just stumbles across incidentally in life; nor is it merely an essential feature within life. Rather, immanent existence as such, being a fallen world, is in fundamental contradiction with its creator, and only a sufficiently developed subjectivity will be able to perceive this.²²⁹ Further, only one who has been

²²⁸ *SKS* 7, 520 / *CUP* 1, 572-73.

²²⁹ One can see that Kierkegaard's conception of the comic has implications for metaphysics. His intuition that life is contradiction (*JJ*:261 / *JP* 1, 705) and that, therefore, the comic, which is based on

saved from this sinful state, such as a redeemed Christian, could existentially access the way out that grace provides. In other words, only the religious person, specifically the Christian, can have the widest human purview of the comic.

Illegitimate Forms of the Comic

That there is a proper relation that the comic finds among the stages of existence suggests that a distorted use of the comic can distort or misrepresent this hierarchical arrangement. Climacus describes such attempts at the comic as “illegitimate.” He says, “The test of the comic is to examine what relation between the spheres the comic statement contains. If the relation is not right, the comic is illegitimate....”²³⁰ The comic is properly in service to truth and to human upbuilding, and one that is not or obscures that subjective advancement is betraying its own nature as the comic.²³¹

There are many different ways that the comic can be illegitimate or perverted from its essential task. For example, a malformed comic can be immature by taking life too lightly (or, perhaps better said, by taking life lightly in the wrong way).²³²

contradiction, is essential to human existence and growth seem to be deeply tied to his belief in the “infinite qualitative difference” between humanity and God (*SKS* 11, 237 / *SUD*, 126) and to Christianity’s supreme comic purview.

²³⁰ *SKS* 7, 475 / *CUP* 1, 523.

²³¹ “The power in the comic is the policeman’s badge, the emblem of jurisdiction that every agent who in our day actually is an agent must carry. But this comic power is not impetuous or reckless, its laughter not shrill; on the contrary, it is careful with the immediacy that it lays aside” (*SKS* 7, 256 / *CUP* 1, 282).

²³² “[T]his immature humor is a kind of flippancy that has skipped too soon out of reflection. Weary of time and the endless succession of time, the humorist skips away and finds a humorous alleviation in asserting the absurd, just as it can be an alleviation to parody the meaning of life by paradoxically stressing the trivial, by abandoning everything and concentrating on bowling and training horses. But this is immature humor’s counterfeiting of the paradox.... This immature humor is so far from being religiousness that it is an esthetic subtlety that skips past the ethical” (*SKS* 7, 266 / *CUP* 1, 292). See also *SKS* 7, 242 / *CUP* 1, 266; *SKS* 7, 437 / *CUP* 1, 482. That Climacus can indict immature humor on the charge that it “skips past the ethical” is another implicit argument for the hierarchical arrangement of the stages and the position that a rightly-formed version of a higher stage will have passed through and so will

Also, the comic can become titillatingly ambiguous, obscuring the clarity that it is otherwise meant to show. Even a comic example that strays into the immoral can be instructive if it becomes an occasion for regret and repentance, but ambiguity prevents even the beneficial clarity of error.²³³

On the other hand, the comic can become so single-minded and unrelentingly totalized in its critique that it could take the form of “total irony”²³⁴ or “demonic humor.”²³⁵ When the irony turns towards nihilism,²³⁶ one’s spiritual development is adversely affected and tends towards the “demonic.”²³⁷ Instead of finding a way out that

include the lower stages within itself. Note Burgess’ comment that the “higher right” of the comic writer “includes accepting duty and responsibility” (Burgess, 94).

²³³ “[I]t is immoral to abandon oneself to the titillation of indefiniteness that is implicit in laughing when one does not quite know whether one ought to laugh or not, so that one does not have joy out of the laughter, and that makes it impossible to regret if one has laughed in the wrong place” (SKS 7, 471.1 / CUP 1, 518n-519n). Cf. *Pap.* VI B 70:13 / JP 2, 1746.

Kierkegaard knows how delicately this must be handled. In *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus says that the combination of jest and earnestness “must not be lunacy” else “there is no communication,” but neither jest nor earnestness must completely dominate or “it is direct communication,” which would make it a failure in its relation to subjectivity (SKS 12, 130 / PC, 125).

²³⁴ Kierkegaard shares Hegel’s concern, against Schlegel, that Romantic irony tends towards this recklessness. For example, Kierkegaard says that Schlegel’s *Lucinde* is “an attempt to suspend all ethics,” and to turn ethical qualifications into a mere game or playfulness (SKS 1, 324 / CI, 289).

²³⁵ Lippitt says that an irony lacking anything positive to offer in place of the aestheticism it has critiqued through the comic will result in nihilism (Lippitt [2000], 63).

Evans says the following concerning one who ironizes based, not on another relativity, but on the absolute: “This sort of absolute irony is only legitimate when the individual preserves a relation to the eternal, which provides the higher viewpoint that justifies the negativity. The individual who lacks the positive relation to the eternal but nevertheless turns against the relative values of life is described as in despair, and his activity leads to nihilism. It is ironical that much of what is described as existentialism fits this category and certainly would have been so regarded by Climacus” (Evans [1999], 189).

²³⁶ Pattison implies that it might have been Poul Martin Møller who, after examining Romanticism and Hegelianism, taught Kierkegaard to perceive the dangerous potential that irony has to end in nihilism. He notes that some themes in Kierkegaard’s dissertation, including the tracing of modern nihilism back to Schlegel’s appropriation of Fichte, are anticipated by Møller. (George Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious* [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992], 28).

²³⁷ Evans (1999), 193.

Paying careful attention to Kierkegaard’s language, one may wonder why, when *irony* goes bad by becoming totalized and moving toward nihilism, Kierkegaard refers to the product as demonic or diabolical *humor*. For example, he writes of that irony that “would not allow itself to be regenerated by humor and

leads to the eternal, one escapes from the eternal and into nothingness.²³⁸ Although one attempts “a desperate reveling in empty finitude” by finding “a perverse joy in the vacuity of the finite,”²³⁹ this false joy must lead to ashes and death.

A related malformation of the comic is one that lacks—or aspires to lack—all “position,” to use Lippitt’s term.²⁴⁰ He argues that radical undecidability is ultimately

subsequently be redeemed, but developed as diabolical humor” (DD:39 / *JP* 2, 1622. Italics removed). Given the careful distinctions made between irony and humor, why does he not rather speak of irony that has gone wrong in this way as demonic *irony*?

I posit that the answer can be found in his understanding of irony as emphasizing the self in distinction from sociality and external finitude (which is why it serves as the transition from aesthetic immediacy to the individuality of the ethical) and humor’s totalistic quality of relativizing all things, including the self and its efforts at ethical success. The transition, I argue, goes something like this: The normal, healthy path of irony places a new emphasis on selfhood that should enable transition to the ethical. A form of irony, like Romantic irony, that becomes abnormally strong, though, will strengthen selfhood to an unnatural degree, creating delusions of grandeur and even aspirations of divinity: “for who is as great as Allah, and who can endure before him?” (*SKS* 1, 312 / *CI*, 276). This abnormally inflated ironist will attempt, in addition to his obliteration of all finitude, to incorporate the obliteration of the eternal as well, tolerating no rival gods. At this point, the inflated irony might be referred to as “humor” because of its infinite scope—though normal healthy humor criticizes the finite in order to prepare a way for the entrance of the divine, so to attempt to use humor against the divine is illegitimate “demonic” humor. Humor can be either religious or demonic (Not5:30 / *JP* 2, 1721), and religiously-friendly humor will help to bring God into focus by wanting to have the absolute without the relative, which it tells to go to the devil (Not5:33 / *JP* 2, 1722). Demonic humor, however, “attempts to draw even the divine along into the humoristic ‘Go to the devil’” (*Pap.* III B 16 / *JP* 2, 1730). The swelling of scope of the irony to include the divine is partly what justifies the change in terminology to demonic humor. Of course, no finite human can sustain himself or succeed in a storming of heaven’s throne, so the end of this path will necessarily be his suicidal destruction. The attempt to destroy all other meaning and life is nihilism, and this is no diet for an existing human being to survive on. Soon enough, the claims of self-sufficiency will be revealed as deception, and the powers of demonic humor will be turned on the self as well, leading to a nihilistic suicide. This too explains the term “humor,” for while healthy humor will criticize the inadequacy of the self but find a way out that leads to forgiveness in God, demonic humor has left the self as the last resort, and, as the sands of this island self ineluctably erode, it finds no way out from its own insufficiency but ultimate despair and death. Such nihilistic humor does not abase itself and all else before God but tries to abase everything, including God, which leads to its own submersion and destruction. Ironically, then, this irony that began by forging the individual “ends by killing the individual” due to its abnormal and unhealthy growth (FF:159 / *JP* 2, 1717). Humans are to mature, but they are not to claim the divine throne but must respect the infinite qualitative distinction between God and humanity (*SKS* 11, 237 / *SUD*, 126).

²³⁸ Evans (2006), 90.

²³⁹ Barrett, 137.

²⁴⁰ Lippitt (2000), 136. Lippitt believes that irony must have some “position” in order to avoid becoming the total irony of infinite absolute negativity. I agree, and I extend to point beyond irony alone to include all forms of the comic.

nihilistic.²⁴¹ Climacus agrees that “the comic that belongs nowhere is *eo ipso* illegitimate,”²⁴² which is why total irony must also be illegitimate since what legitimates an ironist is that “he keeps his life in it” and does not try to flee to philistinism.²⁴³ Given the structure of the comic argued for in this work, it seems very doubtful that anyone could achieve a form of the comic that consistently and coherently belongs nowhere, for there must always be a prior norm—a prior place of earnestness—to give the comic engine the fuel to run. To express this doubt, Climacus invokes those famous opponents of Socrates, the Sophists. Climacus references a phrase from the sophist Gorgias, “to annihilate earnestness by means of the comic and the comic by means of earnestness,” which, he says, is a divorce that is “rubbish.”²⁴⁴ This evaluation is unsurprising since the comic requires earnestness to function and is properly aimed at the earnestness of developing human subjectivity and also since true earnestness knows the comic nature of the self and of reality. Given what earnestness and the comic are, it is incoherent to say that they could fundamentally oppose one another. As usual, though, the inconsistency that Climacus zeroes in on is the existential inconsistency, where he loves to point out, even beyond the incoherence of an argument, the incoherence of the kind of existence a person must live in order to make that incoherent argument. He says, “[T]he irregularity that an existing person has changed himself into a fantastical X is easily discovered, because it must still be an existing person who wants to use this procedure.... In other

²⁴¹ Ibid., 154-56.

²⁴² *SKS* 7, 475 / *CUP* 1, 523.

²⁴³ *SKS* 7, 473 / *CUP* 1, 521. For a discussion of the legitimate ironist who keeps his life in his irony, see Walsh 212.

²⁴⁴ *SKS* 7, 475 / *CUP* 1, 523.

words, Gorgias, along with his discovery, ends up in the fantastical fringe of pure being, because, if he annihilates the one by means of the other, nothing remains.”²⁴⁵ Gorgias and the sophists reveal that they know as little about what the comic is as they do about being existing humans, and Climacus’ critique of them as transforming into fantastical entities of pure being is very like his critique of the objective philosophers, who also forget that they are existing finite human beings²⁴⁶ and also know nothing about the comic.²⁴⁷ The objective philosophers, who would like to pretend that they have no history or provenance, no particular proclivities apart from reason and the truth, no finite human limitations that would undercut their sweeping conclusions, and no barriers to their having a God’s-eye-view of all of space and time, have a striking resemblance to those who try to use the comic without thereby claiming a “position,” perhaps, like the Sophists, by trying to pit the comic against earnestness itself. Unfortunately for these attempts, an existing human being must have a position, and so must a human’s use of the comic, which has such deep ties to subjectivity. A refusal to acknowledge this does not escape the claim but only exhibits more comic blindness on one’s part.²⁴⁸ Consequently,

²⁴⁵ *SKS* 7, 475-76 / *CUP* 1, 523.

²⁴⁶ Climacus can quip that, while Socrates was interested in striving and existing, “the systematicians and the objectivists have ceased to be human beings and have become speculative thought, which dwells in pure being.... [This type of person] makes an attempt to cease to be a human being, to become a book or an objective something that only a Münchhausen can become” (*SKS* 7, 91-92 / *CUP* 1, 92-93).

²⁴⁷ *SKS* 7, 256 / *CUP* 1, 281.

²⁴⁸ “...just as I have frequently pointed out above with regard to speculative philosophers—namely, that by becoming fantastical and by having arrived at the highest along that road they have become comic” (*SKS* 7, 472 / *CUP* 1, 519). For instance, Climacus toys with the comic example of an executioner who identifies himself with “reason.” (*SKS* 7, 470.1 / *CUP* 1, 518n). This, rightly, strikes one as an absurd claim. One of the earnest barbs underlying this example though, seems to be that it is no less absurd for a philosopher to confuse himself with reason, even though it is a more common mistake. Perhaps a shrewd auditor, with some concern for being an existing human, will laugh at the absurdity of an executioner identifying with reason and realize that it is equally absurd for a philosopher to do so, also necessarily being an existing human being himself. Even if it is culturally more obviously absurd for an executioner to

one sees Climacus implicitly contrasting Socrates' irony, which derives from his earnestness towards the infinite and his own character,²⁴⁹ with the comically absurd attempts of the Sophists to understand the comic. It is no wonder that Socrates, satisfied with being a human being rather than forfeiting humanity to be transformed into the fantastical,²⁵⁰ had occasion to goad the Sophists mockingly.²⁵¹ The comic must have a position or a perspective, however much the Sophists may protest.²⁵²

The comic can have many other illegitimate forms, such as when it tends towards cruelty²⁵³ or blasphemy,²⁵⁴ but let us return to a consideration of the stages of existence and the particular form of the illegitimate comic that tries to confuse or subvert the

make the claim than a philosopher, that does not mean that they are not both equally absurd. A philosopher who stubbornly refuses to admit of his finitude, though, will soon make a mockery of himself by trying to avoid the conditions of existence. He will live in contradiction with actuality, and his life will become a comic example, undercut by existence which will continually be a reminder of the comic foolishness of his claims.

²⁴⁹ *SKS* 7, 83 / *CUP* 1, 83; *SKS* 7, 89.1 / *CUP* 1, 90n. Cf. NB5:147 / *JP* 2, 1753.

²⁵⁰ To see one of Kierkegaard's attempts to offer positive instruction towards healing the problem of not being satisfied with being a human being, see *SKS* 8, 259ff. / *UDVS*, 159ff.

²⁵¹ *SKS* 7, 137.1 / *CUP* 1, 147n.

²⁵² "If someone, for example, wanted to make everything comic without any basis, one would see at once that his comic effect is irrelevant, because it lacks a basis in any sphere, and the inventor himself would be made comic from the viewpoint of the ethical sphere, because he himself as an existing person must have his basis in existence in one way or another" (*SKS* 7, 469-71 / *CUP* 1, 517-18).

Moreover, a human being must have a position even if it is only a degenerating one on the way to destruction. Someone driven to using the comic to oppose being located must soon turn to using the comic against itself, accompanying subjective self-destruction. This does not, however, avoid one's being located since the comic self-destruction can be tracked all the way down. Perhaps because of the close association between the comic and subjectivity, Kierkegaard tends to turn to evocatively ghoulish language to describe one who is experiencing such a degeneratively spiraling form of the comic. For example, in addition to speaking of the "demonic" and the "diabolical," he describes an irony that is a "wasting disease" that makes one "feel best when he is closest to disintegration" and creates a "vampire" who "has sucked the blood of the lover" (*SKS* 1, 110 / *CI*, 49). Again, he describes malformed irony as an "old witch" that first attempts to eat up everything else and then attempts to eat up itself (*SKS* 1, 116 / *CI*, 56).

²⁵³ *SKS* 7, 475 / *CUP* 1, 523.

²⁵⁴ Occasionally, Kierkegaard expressed concern that Hamann's humor verged on blasphemy. E.g., DD:18.c / *JP* 2, 1693.

hierarchical relation of these spheres.²⁵⁵ Recall our language that a “higher” norm subverts a “lower” one, which clarifies why forms of the comic are used as transition points to help a subjectivity ascend the stages of existence. Higher stages of existence contain the lower within them, so since these forms of the comic are “inside” and not “outside” of them they cannot be found comic by them, which is why the highest stage, religiousness, is inaccessible to comic interpretation.²⁵⁶ Climacus says, “The lower can never make the higher comic, that is, cannot legitimately interpret the higher as comic and does not have the power to make it comic.”²⁵⁷ It is the lower that has a comic aspect in the eyes of the higher. This is more than a purely subjective evaluation for Kierkegaard since the higher position is closer to a right view of the world, being more in line with the perspective of God. Without a view of God, it is hard to imagine how Kierkegaard’s stages could have any clear hierarchy or goal at all, merely dissolving into subjective territorialisms and biases. The “qualitative dialectic of the spheres,” however, “denounces subjective arbitrariness.”²⁵⁸ Again, this does not mean that everyone finds the same things to be comical; indeed, since people exist at different stages along life’s way it guarantees that not everyone will find the same things to be comical. It may well be that one thinks he has discovered the contradiction within religiousness and so laughs at religiousness as comic. Since the lower can never make the higher comic, though, his comic effect might be said to be “irrelevant.”²⁵⁹ Since there is no contradiction within

²⁵⁵ *SKS* 7, 475 / *CUP* 1, 523.

²⁵⁶ *SKS* 7, 474 / *CUP* 1, 522.

²⁵⁷ *SKS* 7, 472 / *CUP* 1, 519-20.

²⁵⁸ *SKS* 7, 469 / *CUP* 1, 517.

²⁵⁹ *SKS* 7, 470 / *CUP* 1, 517.

religiousness, which conforms to creation and its Creator as it truly is, the mocker's worldview or perception has failed him, and it is he who is truly in contradiction with actuality, so he is the one who is comic, whether he knows it or not.²⁶⁰ What is found comical, though, is an indication of where one is located, so blindness is as revealing as perception. Laughter alone is no indication that something is legitimately comic.²⁶¹ As one can be wrong in one's moral declarations, so can one be wrong in one's laughter.²⁶²

Climacus' dedication to respecting the order and relation of the stages of existence is reflected in his evaluation of his own comic capacities. Taking a moment of pride, he says that it is his honesty that grants him "a more than ordinary sense of the comic."²⁶³ The idea that honesty could fuel a more robust comic sense is a sufficiently interesting comment (and a peculiar one to those who do not perceive the linkage between comic perception and development of a subject's character—that is, the existential dimension of the intimate tie between jest and earnestness), but he goes on,

²⁶⁰ Climacus says of the one who laughs at religious repentance from a lower position that "in that case the person easily provoked to laughter is himself comic" (*SKS* 7, 472 / *CUP* 1, 519).

²⁶¹ Speaking of a passionate zealot, Climacus says, "Such a figure would undoubtedly become a laughingstock. With what right one would laugh is another question, because the fact that the whole age has become devoid of passion does not entitle it to laugh" (*SKS* 7, 42 / *CUP* 1, 35).

²⁶² It seems to me that laughter and the comic is so associated with the emotion of amusement and with personal expression in modern Western society that we are very hesitant to place many evaluative judgments upon an experience of the comic. However, Kierkegaard believes differently. When one calls something "moral" that is not, or "immoral" that is not, one's morality may be called into question, especially by a higher authority such as law or divine revelation, regardless of how passionately one may be committed to the personal judgment. Humans are morally corrigible. Similarly, Kierkegaard believes that humans are corrigible in their perception of the comic—and this for many of the same reasons since the comic is an ethically and religiously earnest matter for him. The comic, for all of its relation to human subjectivity, is not finally relativistically subjective but can be evaluated just as much as any other human expression of right and wrong. Both are held to the same ultimately divine standard. Although some prefer, as some also did in Kierkegaard's day, to leave the comic in the realm of the ambiguous, the flippant, and the indiscriminant, Climacus reflects on what such a one would do if challenged, "Remember that you are ethically responsible for your use of the comic" (*SKS* 7, 471.1 / *CUP* 1, 519n).

²⁶³ *SKS* 7, 564 / *CUP* 1, 622.

reflecting the idea that what counts as legitimately comic is something like a feature of the universe, whether or not any particular human subjects are there to appreciate it or to recognize it accurately. He speaks of his capacity “for making ludicrous what is ludicrous,” adding, “Strangely enough, I am unable to make ludicrous what is not ludicrous—that presumably requires other capacities.”²⁶⁴ Though Climacus wryly frames this as an inability, it is a quality that is actually to his credit, for it speaks to Climacus’ respect for existence and the hierarchy of subjective development that he will not make use of a form of the comic that illegitimately misrepresents things as other than they are. He believes that any ability to create an illegitimate comic effect is, in truth, a disability. It is a failure of character and a failure of honesty towards the structures of the created order. Framed in this way, a humorist, or perhaps some other type of subject with comic sensitivity, does not resemble an amoral comedian, quick with the wacky slapstick or the cutting remark, as much as he resembles a prophet: one called to proclaim a message not of his own devising who speaks the truth about the world and its inhabitants to those who do not (and may well be determined not to) see it, opening a possibility for their transformation or for their judgment. Could a humorist be summoned for such a noble task? That would indeed be jest in earnestness.

The Illegitimacy of Considering the Comic to Be the Highest

That the comic is present “everywhere” is not a challenge to the hierarchy of the stages of existence since the relation to the comic differs in respect to one’s existential condition.²⁶⁵ Any attempt to confuse or obscure that relation and thus to obscure the

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ SKS 7, 420 / CUP 1, 462.

existential earnestness that grounds the comic would be an illegitimate use of the comic. Additionally, neither should the claim that the comic is present “everywhere” be taken to imply that the comic is the highest or the most triumphant in all of existence, as Climacus reminds his readers time and again. The misunderstanding that the comic is the highest is another form of comic illegitimacy and the final one that will be considered here.

Climacus says that the comic is not the highest sphere of existence “because the religious is the purest pathos.”²⁶⁶ The religious is the highest—higher than the comic even though the “religious person is one who has discovered the comic on the greatest scale.”²⁶⁷ Climacus goes on to explain why it is necessarily an error for one, even such a religious person with a vast perception of the comic, to believe the comic to be the highest: “But if he looks upon the comic as the highest, then his comic is *eo ipso* lower, because the comic is always based on a contradiction, and if the comic itself is the highest, it lacks the contradiction in which the comic exists and in which it makes a showing.”²⁶⁸ The comic, by its very nature, cannot be the highest since, being a contradiction, it depends upon a higher norm that is contradicting a lower one, including lower modes of existence. Even the highest type of comic possible requires an earnest norm that is higher still. Climacus’ statement, then, strongly implies the necessity of having a prior norm in order for the comic to appear. There must be some vantage or place of higher stability from which the comic contradiction may be perceived.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

For Kierkegaard, anyone who considers the comic to be the highest, therefore, clearly does not understand the nature of the comic as contradiction, and, further, probably also does not understand correlate matters such as the hierarchy of the stages of existence, the nature of human subjectivity, the contradiction between the inner and the outer, etc. Nor has this misunderstanding one appropriated these realities existentially to any significant degree. Therefore, to praise the comic as the highest is *eo ipso* to confess that one has an inferior grasp of the comic and cannot, with any great skill, perceive contradictions where they are.

Who is it that considers the comic to be the highest? Climacus names one group in particular: the Hegelians. He says, “In our day, Hegelian philosophy has wanted to give predominance to the comic, which might seem especially odd on the part of Hegelian philosophy, which of all philosophies was least able to stand a blow from that corner.”²⁶⁹ This is another way of stating that, by naming the comic as the highest, the Hegelians have shown how little they understand the comic and how vulnerable they are to it. In his *Aesthetics*, Hegel argues that comedy is both the highest form of art and that which obliterates art as insufficient to its task, leaving only “the presence of this free personal activity of soul-life which is displayed in and along with this dissolution as aware of itself and self-assured.”²⁷⁰ It is as if the Hegelians perceive the comic to be a culmination rather than a contradiction that indirectly points to a still-higher way of existing. Understood this way, merely to define the comic as painless contradiction already constitutes an anti-Hegelian narration by Climacus.

²⁶⁹ SKS 7, 464-65 / CUP 1, 512-13.

²⁷⁰ CUP 2, 265n755.

Climacus, despite being a humorist, refuses to move religiousness to the side in order to give the comic pride of place.²⁷¹ The humorist, who is so skilled at his task and so broad in his purview that he can locate the comic contradictions in much of existence, nevertheless does not have a purview equal to that of the religious, which is also capable of finding the comic contradictions in the humorous manner of existence: “The religiousness that has humor as its incognito is able in turn to see the humorous as comic....”²⁷² The ludicrousness of a humorous existence is apparent to the religious person, though he does not dwell on or delight in finding such contradictions.²⁷³ The humorist, it turns out, has his own incongruities and appears comically incongruous from the higher norm of the religious.²⁷⁴ Neither humor specifically nor the comic more generally run away with life, standing sovereign and mocking all. Rather, they have their limits, and religiousness finds them. Anyone who thinks that humor or any other form of

²⁷¹ Sometimes Climacus frames the Hegelian error not as making the “comic” the highest but as making “humor” the highest. This is understandable since, as mentioned before, humor appears to be the existentially highest form of the comic. As high as it is, though, the religious is still higher. It is an error to make humor “the highest *after* faith,” as if faith were the immediate and as if speculative thought helps us to advance beyond faith to humor (*SKS* 7, 265 / *CUP* 1, 291. *Italics original*). Indeed, it is “perhaps the most confusing confusion” of modern speculative thought to say that humor is the highest, rivaled only by the confusion that faith is immediacy (*SKS* 7, 453 / *CUP* 1, 500). In addition to the error of making humor the highest after faith, Climacus thinks it is also a confusion to make humor “the highest within Christianity” (*SKS* 7, 547 / *CUP* 1, 602). The accusation that the Hegelians do not understand the comic, then, is directly related to the argument that the Hegelians do not understand religion, especially Christianity.

²⁷² *SKS* 7, 474 / *CUP* 1, 521. It is because of God that the religious person is superior on perceiving the comic: “The religious person...joins the conception of God together with everything and sees the contradiction...” (*SKS* 7, 458 / *CUP* 1, 505). God grants one access to an earnestness that is higher than and fundamentally in contradiction with worldly earnestness.

²⁷³ *SKS* 7, 473-74 / *CUP* 1, 521-22.

²⁷⁴ Roberts has noticed the same phenomenon regarding incongruity and superiority: “It is natural that we dissociate ourselves from what we perceive as incongruous, and take our vantage of *perceiving* the incongruity as ‘superior’ to that of the *parties to* (so to speak) the incongruity. Conversely, people who are conscious of being laughed at perceive themselves as being perceived as incongruous, and thus construe themselves to be construed as the inferior position *vis-à-vis* the laughers. If they then can be brought to laugh with the laughers, they dissociate themselves from whatever about themselves is incongruous” (Roberts [1988], 139-40). In short, perceiving an incongruity is a higher position.

the comic is the highest, then, is exposed as comic himself, though perhaps only the religious person will be able to notice this comic incongruity.

Climacus' argument that the comic is not the highest has immediate implications for religion and theology. Anyone who mistakenly elevates the comic must surely also mistakenly denigrate the religious, since the religious must be dethroned for the misunderstood comic to ascend. When the philosophers claim for themselves powers of insight and objective comprehension that bring them to rival God,²⁷⁵ Climacus describes their position as a comic one. However, the arrogating philosophers are only comic if there is indeed a true God from whose vantage the philosophers' claims appear pathetic and self-mockingly hubristic. If there were no God, then the philosophers' claims are no longer so evidently comic. Indeed, these philosophers might just be the most intelligent beings in the world, worthy of reverence, not mockery. In this case, without God to contradict the contrary claims, the positions of the philosophers may well be lost as comic fodder. With God, they exhibit a deep contradiction, and their ludicrousness rests upon them in fitting comic judgment.

Conclusion

According to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the comic is a contradiction, rooted in norms which are held with varying degrees of earnestness, that is essentially, though not absolutely, painless since there is a "way out" from the pain of the contradiction. If there were no way out, the contradiction would be tragic and not comic.

²⁷⁵ Climacus says, for example, that it may well be that God can perceive and understand the commensurability of the outer and the inner but that no human being, himself caught in existence, can see things this way, even if metaphysically it is possibly true (*SKS* 7, 131 / *CUP* 1, 141). Again, while many philosophers may define "truth" as the agreement of thinking and being—and, indeed, thought and being do agree for God—it is "not that way for any existing spirit" (*SKS* 7, 173-5 / *CUP* 1, 189-90).

The comic is, thus, transitional by nature and is used as such by Kierkegaard at key transitional moments in his stages of existence, whether in the form of irony or of humor. One's perception of the comic, then, may be used as a diagnostic of how far one has matured along the stages of existence. Because the comic can be persuasive in communicating its norms, though, it is more than diagnostic and can be used as indirect communication to influence, but not determine, the subjective growth of others. The successful functioning of the comic depends upon having shared norms with the auditors or observers, and where those shared norms may be lacking, a talented wielder of the comic may be able to instill them in others indirectly.

Due to the clash between norms, the comic has an unavoidably polemical aspect, with some norms, referred to here as "higher" norms in keeping with the hierarchy of the stages of existence, emerging victoriously over others in any given comic instance. The comic is thus a powerful force that must be handled with care, preserving its legitimately ethical and religious role.

Although Kierkegaard believes the comic to be essential to human existential transformation, there is nothing deterministic or necessary about this transition. Comic contradictions may be interpreted in various ways, after all, and one may even attempt to wield the comic in a manner contrary to its legitimate nature. Whether through ambiguity or through deliberate act, illegitimate conceptions and uses of the comic tend to disrespect the hierarchy of the stages of existence or attempt to deny or obscure that the comic is intimately tied to earnest perspectives of normativity. Earnestness is the ground of the comic, though, so, try as it might, the illegitimately comic may not persist

in its pretense that it is accountable to nothing and no one or that its play has no earnest implications.

The comic is intimately tied to subjective maturity in human existence, partly because a heightened sensitivity to comic contradiction is associated with a heightened sensitivity to the incommensurability between one's inner subjectivity and the outer world. That is, the comic is associated with subjective maturity because it marks one's progress among the stages of existence, functions as an incognito to hide and protect one's developing inwardness, stands as a polemical barrier to prevent the devolution of one's subjectivity to a lower form of existence, and acknowledges and guards selfhood by defending against direct communication with others or direct relation to the divine. The comic, then, recognizes the misrelation between individual humans and externality, and any who fail to recognize this essential element of human subjectivity, as Climacus charges the Hegelians with doing, are vulnerable to comic judgment for their foolishness. Consequently, the comic is a useful tool for opposing Hegelian mediation, which finds inner and outer to be commensurable. The comic legitimately opposes it, for example, by highlighting the incoherent attempts of philosophical abstraction to avoid the confession that even philosophers are existing human beings, themselves having subjectivities that cannot finally be merged seamlessly into objective thought.

Perception of the comic depends upon prior norms that one holds with some degree of earnestness. For this reason, the comic contradiction itself cannot be the "highest" thing in the equation since it depends upon grounding in higher norms.²⁷⁶ The

²⁷⁶ Note that for most of this paper I have been speaking of the comic as "grounded" in a norm of earnestness. I believe this description still to be accurate, provided that one recognize that Kierkegaard believes the "higher" matters, like the divine and the eternal, to be the truly secure and truly foundational ones. In other words, to be "grounded" one must be rooted not in the shifting sands of terrestrial matters

comic contradiction indicates a higher stability, so to speak. For example, laughing at socially inappropriate behavior is not the highest in human existence since it is parasitic upon an understanding of what constitutes *normal* social behavior, which even the mocker himself may not satisfy. Such a norm is higher and makes possible the comic contradiction with instantiated behavior. For Kierkegaard, the Christian religious is the highest of all, superior to all forms of the comic, and therefore may not legitimately be subjected to comic critique. To laugh, say, at Christian repentance is, in fact, the exposing of the mocker's own subjective incoherence to comic judgment. From her existential position, the Christian has the widest purview of the comic because she has the widest purview of contradictions with this highest ideal of human existence.

Contradictions are exposed in even the highest of human achievements, such as societies, philosophical systems, grand works of art, noble institutions such as marriage, etc. and, by passing through humor, the Christian has learned to see the contradictions in her own life in her failure to live up to the Christian ideal. Consequently, though she can see the most, the Christian observation of the comic is very often gentle and merciful, not dwelling on the failures of humanity but using such pain as is present in the comic to direct towards the way out of Christian redemption.

but rooted in the eternal heaven. "Grounded" naturally suggests a downward direction to us, while Kierkegaard's understanding of the comic's "grounding" always roots it in something higher.

One might wonder if Kierkegaard's language of the hierarchy of stages could be rearranged so that the "highest" stage, the religious, is reimagined as the "lowest" or most fundamental stage, grounding all others. In this way, importance is noted by depth and foundation rather than height. I believe that Kierkegaard would object to such a reordering, though, since it could imply that all humans innately contain the Christian religious, if only they understood themselves sufficiently to find it there. Christian existence is not innate for Kierkegaard, and even religiousness more broadly conceived is something that must be attained with developed subjectivity and the utmost strenuousness. To suggest that religiousness is internal and/or native to the human soul is a position that Kierkegaard believes is pagan, and his pseudonym Johannes Climacus continually contrasts this view with that of Christianity throughout *Philosophical Fragments*.

CHAPTER THREE

Kierkegaard's Conception of the Comic Illustrated in Other Works

Having been exposed to some important dimensions of Kierkegaard's thinking on the topic of the comic, let us see how this view of the comic plays out in other of his writings. While Kierkegaard's entire authorship is too massive to examine in this space, it is worth considering a few other texts from Kierkegaard in order to demonstrate that the view of the comic presented in Johannes Climacus' *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is not limited to that text alone. That is, while elsewhere in Kierkegaard's works one never finds an analytical explication of the comic and its forms to the degree that one does in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, one nevertheless finds a similar understanding of the comic to be operative. The theory is present, even when it is not being addressed so theoretically or directly.

For this task, I have selected three sources of Kierkegaard's writings: *Prefaces*, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, and the *Corsair* affair. All three sources have a proximity to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, with *Prefaces* being published two years before *Postscript* in 1844, the *Corsair* affair taking off almost exactly when Kierkegaard was sending *Postscript* to the printers at the end of 1845, and *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* being published in 1847 as the first entry into Kierkegaard's so-called "second authorship."¹ Despite their relative temporal proximity,

¹ In my presentation, I address the *Corsair* affair last for two reasons: chronologically, the *Corsair* affair extended beyond the publication of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, and thematically it segues well into my subsequent chapter on Deconstructionist readings of Kierkegaard.

however, the three sources have many differences, including works from both Kierkegaard's first and second authorships, works that are both signed and pseudonymous, and works that are both explicitly religious and not. That one can find the previously argued understanding of the comic in this variety of writings by Kierkegaard supports the argument for the accuracy of the account, and this holds true even for *Prefaces*, which is written before Kierkegaard was able to flesh out his thinking in his fullest treatment of the comic, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

Prefaces: a Jest in Earnest

Prefaces (1844) appears to be a very silly and erratic work. It is a compilation of what purports to be prefaces to various books that at first glance do not necessarily appear to have a connection that strongly unifies them. Some could be tempted to suppose that a work that collects several prefaces to *other* books—why would anyone do such a thing?—is an exercise in the frivolous or is an empty comic jest, warranting little more from a reader than a smirk of amusement. Instructed by the previous account of Kierkegaard's use of and thinking on the comic, though, one is aware how Kierkegaard conceives of the comic as fundamentally rooted in earnestness. We are informed, then, that where Kierkegaard makes use of the comic, whether high and witty or low and cheap, one's antennae should go up to detect the earnest matter at hand that passionately drives him. For him, a comic work is not therefore a trivial work. Indeed, many works that take themselves far more seriously, as will be argued in *Prefaces* itself, expose themselves as being far more trivial.

As an initial indication of how Kierkegaard could be bringing jest and earnestness together with *Prefaces*, note that it was published on the same day, June 17, 1844, as a far

more direct and didactic and far less comic work of Kierkegaard's, *The Concept of Anxiety*. In fact, these two works were published within two weeks of two other works by Kierkegaard, *Three Upbuilding Discourses* and *Philosophical Fragments*.² Kierkegaard is extremely, even extraordinarily, deliberate in his publishing, and Climacus gives us some hint as to why Kierkegaard might have published the silly *Prefaces* amongst such august company. He believes that the public has been ascribing Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works to one writer, and anyone who had thought that Kierkegaard was a direct and didactic author after reading *The Concept of Anxiety* came across the "merry little book" of *Prefaces* and so "gave up hope upon seeing light literature from the same hand."³ That is, the addition of the comic in *Prefaces* preserves Kierkegaard's indirect communication by frustrating those who wish to read him as a direct teacher. To a single reader with developed subjectivity, though, the comic is comprehensible, and one can detect the earnestness lying below, even if it is not directly given by the author. Anyone who is objective in spirit and seeking a directly-given instruction in a tidy objective packet will be frustrated and thrown off by the merry *Prefaces*. Anyone with the requisite subjectivity to be comfortable in the comic, however, can receive *Prefaces* beneficially and not find it to be a stumbling block. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Nicolaus Notabene, the pseudonymous author of *Prefaces*, begins his collection of eight prefaces with, of course, a preface of his own. This most prefatory of prefaces begins by noting how a triviality—of which a preface, especially in comparison with a

² *P*, vii.

³ *SKS* 7, 245 / *CUP* 1, 270. Todd W. Nichol notes a similar pairing with the publishing of *Christian Discourses* and *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress* in 1848 (*P*, vii.1).

book, is one—might, much like an unguarded exclamation or involuntary gesture, provide an opportunity “to slip into a person and discover something that has escaped more careful observation.”⁴ A preface, which appears to be a trivial matter like a jest, in fact hides a deeper earnestness. Because it is less guarded in its presentation, it can provide a greater access into the author, even if obliquely, than the more direct and didactical content of the book itself might provide.

In fact, not just a preface but this entire work that is *Prefaces* claims for itself this trivial identity—and with it the implication that, despite being so trivial, it may reveal something that is far from trivial. The very subtitle of *Prefaces* is self-effacing: “Light Reading for People in Various Estates According to Time and Opportunity.”⁵ Don’t take this seriously, it seems to say. This is merely light reading to be a pleasant diversion. It is not urgent, so just pick it up when you have a spare moment to kill. The brief postscript to *Prefaces* repeats the sly claim that it is merely “light reading,” so it goes without saying that such a trivial work as this could never cause a disruptive conflict or quarrel...right? It surely could be no threat to you or anyone. If one were to find something objectionable in this little book of light reading, though, perhaps the question should be asked as to what one *really* objects to.⁶

Earnestness within the Merry Prefaces

What is it about this triviality of a work, this merry jest of a collection, that makes it so important? What kind of deeper earnestness could it hold? There are several

⁴ SKS 4, 467 / P, 3.

⁵ SKS 4, 465 / P, 1.

⁶ SKS 4, 527 / P, 68.

diverse, though related, topics at which *Prefaces*, amidst its comic playfulness, levels serious critiques. Such points of attack can be discovered in various places throughout the assembled prefaces, but each preface can be understood as having a more or less specific focus on certain topics. Prefaces I-IV most directly critique J. L. Heiberg for his arrogance, daintiness, empty promises, and posturing for the age. Prefaces V and VI mock the foibles of Danish society, with the former critiquing the crowd and its tendency to downplay the individual in favor of societies and associations and the latter critiquing the cultured and their prideful attitude towards what makes suitable devotional literature. Preface VII pokes fun at scholarship, particularly its obsession with Hegelian mediation and its promises to write another book—namely one that will conclude the system and so be finished with everything. Preface VIII skewers philosophy and its pride at claiming to be the absolute, using the character of a naïve student of philosophy who claims to be founding a journal in order to help people understand philosophy better.⁷

The foci of the prefaces appears to be broad, but their assembly into one work by Nicolaus Notabene is not haphazard or random. Often the topics imply one another and so are well-suited to being bound together, despite their various qualities of character and interest. For example, in Preface II one sees how the mockery of J. L. Heiberg as “the public’s unquestionable favorite” is not just a critique of Heiberg himself but also a

⁷ Strictly speaking, *Prefaces* is said to be “by” Nicolaus Notabene, as if he were the author of them all (*SKS* 4, 465 / *P*, 1; cf. *SKS* 4, 475-76 / *P*, 12). Effectively, however, I find the prefaces to be sufficiently different in tone to treat *Prefaces* as an anthology of prefaces from different sources. For example, I find little psychologically in common between the high-toned and arrogant author of Preface I and the honest and self-deprecating servant of philosophy in Preface VIII. Perhaps the preface authors are best understood as a collection of various characters that Notabene has created. Thus, each has a certain integrity that is worth considering unto themselves, even if they are to be understood as coming from the same pseudonymous hand. This was certainly Kierkegaard’s attitude toward his own pseudonymous creations.

critique of the public who judges him so.⁸ That is, the critiquing of Heiberg's pretensions also entails a critique of the reading public, reviewers, newspapers, etc. who all enable this appalling man through their pride and gossip.⁹ This links up to Kierkegaard's other concerns about "the crowd" and the loss of the subjective concern and ethical and religious development of individuality that one finds elsewhere in Kierkegaard's writings. Preface V, with its send up of The Total Abstinence Association and its supposed infinite importance in contrast with the uncelebrated life of a mere individual in sedulous ethical development,¹⁰ addresses a similar problem from a different point of entry. Similarly, the widespread pride of Heiberg and the Danish people, which lead them to seek out supposedly grand and important tasks, being entirely unsatisfied by the menial labors of ethical growth or living in Christian faith, is linked in Kierkegaard's mind to the pride of scholarship in general and of philosophers in particular. Everyone wants to wear the badge of Hegelian philosophy, since it is publicly honored and grants one standing not only socially but even world-historically! It is an easy ticket to public admiration. Everyone wants to touch the mantle of philosophy, in hopes that its prestige

⁸ SKS 4, 483 / P, 19.

⁹ Ibid. Observe that even at this date Kierkegaard is demonstrating his concern with public media. Any who would suggest that Kierkegaard's ire concerning the *Corsair* affair is, in fact, merely misplaced pride on his part at being ridiculed is faced with the counter-evidence of the *Prefaces*, published years before the *Corsair* affair ever occurred. For example, as Joakim Garff tells it, Kierkegaard initially was delighted by *The Corsair*, perhaps even slipping some "wicked ideas" to Goldschmidt to publish (Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000], 379), but *The Corsair*'s attacks caused Kierkegaard "to lose his head" (Ibid., 393), after which point Kierkegaard had to "summon up powerful religious motives to justify the assassination of Møller" through exposure (Ibid., 394). For Garff, Kierkegaard's claimed religious motives for objecting to *The Corsair* were posturing after the fact in order to give a sheen of respectability to what, in fact, was mere personal animus rising from a bruised sense of pride. A consideration of *The Prefaces*, though, reveals Kierkegaard's genuine concern for the gossip and shamefulness of the public media of his day, long before the personal attacks of *The Corsair* came onto the scene.

¹⁰ SKS 4, 490-91 / P, 28-29.

will rub off on their own fingers, rather than concerning themselves with the more basic and more difficult task of developing selfhood. Thus, they accept Hegelianism uncritically and repeatedly use its language, whether or not they understand it or what it would mean for themselves. Proving their relevance to the cutting-edge demands of the age, people write books in which the word “mediation” appears multiple times on each page,¹¹ without realizing that mediation is “for banal minds”¹² (VII).

Preface VIII

In such a way, *Prefaces* builds to its final preface. Most of the comic critique of the first prefaces are leveled against those, be they Heiberg, the reading public, the cultured, associations, philosophers, etc., who are too concerned with pride and trendiness to reflect on their own subjective states as existing individuals responsible to account for their actions before God. Kierkegaard finds the comic element in their fleeing from themselves into their culture’s multifarious distractions. In Preface VIII, though, he reverses it. He dares to ask what it would look like if someone actually were concerned enough with his own subjective development and actually took philosophy seriously enough to try to understand it and appropriate it into his life. What would it look like if someone trusted that Hegelian philosophy is in fact everything that everyone says it is and so set out to live his life accordingly? The result is also comic, in a different way. The young student of philosophy, as I call him, expresses successive naïveties in praise of the exaltation of philosophy in contrast to his own lowliness, and this gives rise to a certain amusement in the reader. It continues, though, to the point

¹¹ SKS 4, 498 / P, 36.

¹² SKS 4, 497 / P, 35.

where the student's praising words begin to appear as a kind of satire on the superiority of philosophy, not reflecting a satirical tone in the student, who remains devoted in his praise, but a satirical situation that Kierkegaard has crafted by using the devoted student as his tool to expose the limits of philosophy and its devotees.¹³ For example, the student

¹³ The trusting student of Preface VIII exemplifies the theory that Climacus puts forth in the following passage: "Within the realm of pure thinking many, many objections can perhaps be made against Hegelianism, but that leaves everything essentially unchanged. But willing as I am (in the capacity of a poor reader who by no means presumes to be a judge) to admire Hegel's logic, willing as I am to admit that there can be much for me to learn when I turn to it again, I shall also be just as proud, just as defiant, just as obstinately assertive, just as intrepid in my assertion that Hegelian philosophy confuses existence by not defining its relation to an existing person, by disregarding the ethical.... Therefore something terrible can happen to Hegel's philosophy—an indirect attack can be the most dangerous. Let a doubting youth, but an existing doubter with youth's lovable, boundless confidence in a hero of scientific scholarship, venture to find in Hegelian positivity the truth, the truth for existence—he will write a dreadful epigram on Hegel.... [T]he youth must never think of wanting to attack him; he must rather be willing to submit unconditionally to Hegel with feminine devotedness, but nevertheless with sufficient strength also to stick to his question—then he is a satirist without suspecting it. The youth is an existing doubter; continually suspended in doubt, he grasps for truth—so that he can exist in it.... The youth's admiration, his enthusiasm, and his limitless confidence in Hegel are precisely the satire on Hegel" (*SKS* 7, 282-83 / *CUP* 1, 309-11).

The student is deadly to Hegel precisely because of his trust that Hegelianism will have some truth for him about how to exist, but Climacus expresses Kierkegaard's doubt that Hegel has much of anything to say concerning the ethical interest of existing individuals. The student's trust that Hegel will be of help, then, will manifest as satire. The student's passion for existence will underscore that Hegelianism shares no such passion and has no sympathy for it. While the student claims the lower position in relation to his philosophical master, in relation to the important matter of existence the student is in fact far superior to the masters of Hegelianism since he continues to believe that philosophy is supposed to help him live a better life and not be an exercise in pure thinking alone.

I argue, then, that it is the student of Preface VIII, not Johannes Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments* or *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, who in Kierkegaard's published works is the more natural fulfillment of the figure Johannes Climacus from *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est*, perhaps written from late 1842 to early 1843, around the time *Either/Or* was first published (*PF*, x). This composition was an experiment to illustrate the existential effects of a young Johannes Climacus who, so devoted to the methods of philosophy, sought to be, in the words above, "an existing doubter" by trying to live out the extreme challenge of the commonplace philosophical dictum to doubt everything (*Pap.* IV B 1 114-16 / *PF*, 131-32). Kierkegaard explains his vision: "The plan of this narrative was as follows. By means of the melancholy irony, which did not consist in any single utterance on the part of Johannes Climacus but in his whole life, by means of the profound earnestness involved in a young man's being sufficiently honest and earnest enough to do quietly and unostentatiously what the philosophers say (and he thereby becomes unhappy)—I would strike a blow at [modern speculative] philosophy. Johannes does what we are told to do—he actually doubts everything—he suffers through all the pain of doing that, becomes cunning, almost acquires a bad conscience. When he has gone as far in that direction as he can go and wants to come back, he cannot do so.... Now he despairs, his life is wasted, his youth is spent in these deliberations. Life has not acquired any meaning for him, and all this is the fault of philosophy" (*Pap.* IV B 16 / *PF*, 234-35; cf. *Pap.* IV B 6 / *PF*, 235 and *SKS* 7, 231 / *CUP* 1, 255.). Certainly by the time of *Postscript* Climacus does not have the boundless confidence in Hegel and in philosophy's superiority in all things that Kierkegaard was experimenting with in his early composition. Also, instead of existentially being characterized by irony, the later Climacus becomes a humorist, probably indicating some of Kierkegaard's developing thoughts on the nature of the comic. Kierkegaard had been reflecting about Johannes Climacus for years (E.g., *DD*:203 / *JP* 2, 1575 written in 1839), and it should not surprise us to

claims that philosophy “makes every theologian into a philosopher and does it so that he can satisfy the demand of the times, which must then be philosophical, which in turn presupposes that the times, that is, the totality of individuals, are philosophical. What a lofty hope for every theological graduate!”¹⁴ The reader falters at the student’s laughably incongruous confidence and begins to ask himself such questions as: Is philosophy truly superior to theology? Must theology, to perform its task, submit to the assumptions and methods of philosophy? Is it necessary to engage in a task that supposedly satisfies the demand of the times? Are the times in fact univocal and obvious so that their demand can be simply lifted off of society or history? Is philosophy truly what would satisfy our society’s needs at the moment? Is it sensible to assume that all individuals are actually philosophical? Is the pursuit of man-made philosophy truly a loftier hope for theological graduates than analysis and explication of the Christian gospel? The explicit purity of the student’s devotion to his purpose of serving philosophy¹⁵ makes clear some latent assumptions that may be driving many in Kierkegaard’s Denmark, but bringing that purpose to the surface makes it appear rather laughable and so causes the reader to reflect on whether his own motivations may not in fact be just as laughable. A reader who

see his use of the name change over time. The student of Preface VIII does, though, demonstrate the humble earnestness and devotion to philosophy that inadvertently satirizes philosophy by expecting an importance from it for his existence that it cannot deliver. He refutes such philosophy not primarily with logical objections but with his integrity of existential appropriation, showing it to be unfit for living human beings. He is the Johannes Climacus of *De omnibus dubitandum est* in a less ironic form. Moreover, while one sees the early Johannes Climacus begin to enact the philosophical steps of his journey, one is left with the preface alone for the young student, getting a sense for his plans without ever seeing them in action. This is enough, though, since the sad results of the philosophical endeavor are already foreshadowed in the preface. Additionally, one sees the fundamental earnestness that drives the comic *Prefaces* by taking it on analogy with *De omnibus dubitandum est*. Just as Johannes Climacus’ honest and earnest endeavor was meant to “strike a blow at [modern speculative] philosophy,” so is the student of Preface VIII. There is serious business at hand in this supposed light reading.

¹⁴ SKS 4, 511 / P, 50.

¹⁵ SKS 4, 512 / P, 51.

begins by laughing at the author of Preface VIII may find that he is soon laughing at himself. The satirical edge, then, may just prompt him into changing himself accordingly.

It should be noted that the naïve optimism of the student of philosophy in Preface VIII is not simply comic. It is comic—and sad. The student's hope for the success of his journal of philosophy, where even the vaunted Heiberg's attempt has failed, elicits a slightly sad admiration from the reader for his enterprising attempt.¹⁶ The supreme self-effacement of the student in speaking of his own obtuseness and in confessing that he does not understand philosophy, which so many others appear to, brings the reader to smile sadly at the lowly worker and his honest confession.¹⁷ His dream that philosophy itself would condescend to speak to him is both absurdly romanticized and charmingly naïve.¹⁸ Ultimately, though, the student elicits sadness from the reader precisely because it is discovered that he has the integrity to follow through with his service to philosophy that so many lack. The philosophical system is a severe master that insists upon ironing out or lopping off the contradictions that Kierkegaard believes are inherent to human existence. With the student we have an existing human being faithfully devoted to living out a system that cannot be lived out by existing human beings. His pure devotion to philosophy will lead him to shipwreck upon the shoals of a worldview that cannot accommodate him or any human. Yet he sails forth trustingly, unaware that he is doomed. In this preface to his journal, the student speaks freely about his deeply-held

¹⁶ *SKS* 4, 508-9 / *P*, 47-48.

¹⁷ *SKS* 4, 512 / *P*, 51.

¹⁸ *SKS* 4, 522 / *P*, 62.

aspirations, expectations, fears and hopes for the future, and motivating desires. This is all very human stuff but very unfitting for philosophy, which demands the objectivity and rigors of reason alone. Observe that the student ends his preface, having expressed the desires he has bound up with this journal, by saying, “In the journal itself I dare not give space to the outpourings of my heart; there I go my winding way along the path of thought. ‘Dead to the many conditions here on earth, / The multifarious, the manifold, / The ceremonial, the everyday.’”¹⁹ The plucky student must lay aside his little human heart in order to satisfy his task for philosophy, and, because he hopes for more from philosophy than it can give him, his willingness to sacrifice his humanity in this way is a sadness. The comic contradictions of the naïve student, sustained through the preface, at the end turn toward the painful contradiction of tragedy, once it is suggested what fidelity to his hopeless task must entail for him. His final words to us before descending into the philosophical system are appropriately poetical, being a quotation from the Danish Romantic poet Baggesen. He must surrender these poetical words as he dies to being a human concerned for his daily existence in order to calcify into the crystalline coolness of objective philosophy.

Two Ways to Show Hegelianism’s Contradiction with Reality

With its touching end, Preface VIII shows the existential possibilities that the naïve student will be sacrificing by trying to follow through Hegelian philosophy consistently. That is, this philosophy, which so often is exposed by Kierkegaard in its absurdities, is occasionally, as there, revealed to be a serious threat should anyone overcome his hypocritical posturing long enough to take it seriously. This philosophy

¹⁹ SKS 4, 526 / P, 67.

would be inhuman for anyone actually trying to apply it to their lives. In this way, Kierkegaard's genuine concern regarding Hegelian philosophy is revealed to be an earnestly-held norm in his construction of the comic work of *Prefaces*. He earnestly believes that Hegelian philosophy, with all of its pretense and exalted claims, is in contradiction with human existence. Demonstrating this contradiction is an immensely fruitful source for Kierkegaard's comic writing. In *Prefaces*, there are two primary types used to demonstrate this contradiction: 1) the foolish person who thinks the prestige of philosophy has gotten him farther than it has since he claims its benefits without in fact consistently living into what the philosophy would mean for his life, and 2) the endearingly naïve person who does his level best to live out Hegelian philosophy, out of a sincere desire to pursue truth, but who will find that he must sacrifice anything recognizably human to do so consistently. Both demonstrate the philosophy's contradiction with existence, one by exposing the comic absurdity of using philosophy to have a world-historically exalted life while pooh-pooing the actual demands and tasks of existing as a regular human being and the other by exposing the naïveté of devoting one's life to a philosophy that could never repay one's efforts but only strip one's human particularity and passions away. The student of Preface VIII exemplifies the latter, as discussed above, and J. L. Heiberg serves as a handy representative of the former.

J. L. Heiberg (1791 – 1860). There is little love lost between Kierkegaard and Heiberg,²⁰ and the latter must bear much ridicule in *Prefaces*. Heiberg's status as "the

²⁰ This antagonism is also seen elsewhere in Kierkegaard's writings. For example, see *SKS* 7,169-70 / *CUP* 1, 184 where Heiberg is lampooned as "Dr. Hjortespring" for claiming that he was converted to being a follower of Hegel through a miraculous vision that came to him while in a Hamburg hotel on Easter morning. Climacus notes dryly that "none of the waiters noticed anything," adding that "to be converted by a miracle to the teaching that accepts no miracles is rather topsy-turvy" (*Ibid.*). Some notes on the passage

public's unquestionable favorite"²¹ is, of course, a dis-recommendation in Kierkegaard's eyes, and his success in the selling of his books is skewered in Preface III.²² *Prefaces* repeatedly mocks Heiberg for his elegant daintiness²³ and his "esthetic fine style."²⁴ One recurring line of comic critique concerns Heiberg's publishing an elegant book as a "New Year's gift" to be purchased as gifts for the Christmas season.²⁵ Preface I, intending to be a parody of Heiberg, explains the importance of timing a book to appear for New Year's and describes his little New Year's gift as timed suitably for "the reading public and particularly for any family that celebrates Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve, since it can in every way serve as a gift in good taste that can even be hung on the Christmas tree itself by means of a silk ribbon that is provided in the gilded slipcase."²⁶ Heiberg's arrogance at drawing such attention to himself at the Christmas season seems to pique Kierkegaard, who uses Heiberg's interest in astronomy to mock him in a small vignette where men come to him, after the fashion of Magi in quest of their savior, to seek the answer to astronomical riddles and to fall to their knees in worship of him.²⁷ The preface comments that it "remains of extreme importance, that Prof. Heiberg has thrown himself

indicate that it was Heiberg whom Kierkegaard had in mind (*Pap.* VI B 98:36-38 / *CUP* 2, 44) and that at one point he considered ridiculing Heiberg as both an "April fool" and a "Christmas goat" (*Pap.* VI B 40:14 / *CUP* 2, 44).

²¹ *SKS* 4, 483 / *P*, 19.

²² *SKS* 4, 485 / *P*, 22.

²³ See *P*, 174n30.

²⁴ *SKS* 4, 486 / *P*, 23.

²⁵ See *P*, 174n30 and 176n61.

²⁶ *SKS* 4, 478 / *P*, 14.

²⁷ *SKS* 4, 488 / *P*, 25.

into astronomy. Is this not a piece of good luck, if not for astronomy, then at least for theology?”²⁸ In other words, the less time Heiberg spends doing theology the better. Kierkegaard objects to the assumption of Danish Hegelianism, which Heiberg represents, that the times demand for theology to be renarrated on philosophical grounds.²⁹ It may be that Heiberg’s drawing attention to himself and his writing at the Christmas season symbolizes for Kierkegaard the arrogance of philosophy’s attempt to dominate Christian theology. If so, then *Prefaces* appears to be a work by the anti-Heiberg. Rather than coming out at Christmas and New Year’s, as the times demand, *Prefaces* is published in June, the calendrical antipode to the Christmas season and an extremely untimely month for making a dainty New Year’s gift to be hung on the tree.³⁰ Rather than making a promise to complete the Hegelian system soon,³¹ *Prefaces* is far from systematic, being only a collection of disjointed prefaces to other works, and it makes no promise to complete the system soon since “[w]riting a preface is like ringing someone’s doorbell to trick him...like bowing invitingly in the dance although one does not move....”³² Rather than arrogantly and energetically seeking to change the world through self-important associations or vaunted tomes that promise to complete the system, one who writes prefaces is “really a light-minded ne’er-do-well” who “does not go to the stock exchange

²⁸ SKS 4, 487 / P, 24-25.

²⁹ See P, xii and 178n80.

³⁰ In a further anti-Heiberg move, the *Prefaces* pseudonym Nicolaus Notabene might be subtly named in opposition to another Nicolaus, the St. Nicolaus of Christmas. That is, instead of the St. Nicolaus who brings Heiberg’s New Year’s gift to the reading public of Denmark, this Nicolaus comes with a very different kind of book in the summer.

³¹ He lampoons Heiberg for precisely this: “Therefore, I vow: as soon as possible to realize a plan envisaged for thirty years, to publish a logical system...” (SKS 4, 478 / P, 14).

³² SKS 4, 469 / P, 5.

to feather his nest but only strolls through it” and “does not run errands on behalf of the system.”³³ The writer of prefaces is shiftless, lazy, and irresponsible...or, at least, he must appear so to those dedicated to serious tasks of business, world history, and completing the philosophical system. Yet this shiftless light-mindedness and its flaunting of social norms come from a deeply earnest place of concern for human beings and how they ought to live.³⁴



Both the naïve student and Heiberg evidence the contradiction between Hegelian philosophy and existence, and *Prefaces* finds the comic in that contradiction. For one who wants to exist, like the student, it is comic (with a tragic tinge by the end of his preface) that he would so devotedly seek guidance for how to live his life from a philosophy that is so little interested in human existence and has so little to offer to it in that regard. For one who is not earnestly committed to his own existence but prefers to play with the chic literary posturing of popularly admired philosophy, like Heiberg, it is comic (with the potential for turning tragic if one sympathized with Heiberg, which *Prefaces* does not) to be so very interested in so very many things while being quite uninterested in one of the most important matters: how one is to exist properly as a mere human being under God and among fellow humans. Although the comic forms and emphases are somewhat different between the two types, both comic forms participate in the norm that Hegelian philosophy is incompatible with existence, whether one has sympathy for the character's comic misunderstanding, as with the student, or not, as with

³³ SKS 4, 470 / P, 6.

³⁴ SKS 4, 481-82 / P, 17-18.

Heiberg. A belief, even if it only begins tenuously in the reader, that Hegelian philosophy is inadequate for existing humans is necessary for *Prefaces* to be found to be comic. Without this norm, the comic contradiction in *Prefaces* evaporates. If the high blown claims for philosophy's ability to raise humanity to its fully dignified state and to advance history towards its proper conclusion were in fact true, then *Prefaces* could scarcely be understood. Heiberg would indeed be a faithful civil servant who answered the demand of his times, and his social prominence would be justified. Why would one ridicule such insight and helpfulness? The student would be right in his devotion to Hegelianism, and his goals for a successful philosophy journal would be both noble and likely attained. Why suggest that such a good-hearted student might accomplish less than success when a faithful power like Hegelian philosophy rightly guides his hand? Rather, Kierkegaard wants his reader to see just how incompatible Hegelian philosophy is with the task of human living. Therefore, he underscores the contradictions by winning his reader over to laughter, hoping that Hegelian philosophy's incompatibility with human existence will be a perspective that is inculcated in the reader. In *Prefaces*, he teaches one to discover the comic in what might previously have been considered the normal and the noble, the demand of the times. The hope is that through one's experiencing comic laughter, it might dawn on the reader that so much of Danish culture is truly absurdity. What seemed important may be discovered to be trivial, while what was previously passed over as commonplace might be taken up as the fascinating and heroic challenge of existence. One could say that Kierkegaard seeks a transvaluation of values, and he recruits the comic to his earnest task.

In addition to the norm that Hegelian philosophy is incompatible with the task of existing, *Prefaces* evidences the earnest belief that it *matters* whether or not one lives well. *Prefaces* is more than pure jest because it shows concern for how its readers are living. Specifically, in the choice between Hegelian philosophy and one's own existence, the right choice is to choose the latter. One sees that, for all of his naïveté, the student had good native instincts about the importance of existence and the suspicious failures of objective philosophy:

On the basis of certain observations, I once believed that I had ascertained that things were not entirely right with some of my esteemed contemporaries. In other words, when I, despite every effort, was unable to ascend to the dizzying thought of doubting everything, I decided, in order nevertheless to doubt something, to concentrate my soul on the more human task of doubting whether all the philosophers understood what they said and what was said. This doubt is overcome not in the system, but in life. But if this is the case, what good is it then that philosophy overcomes all doubt if there is still doubt about whether people actually do understand philosophy?³⁵

Unfortunately for him, though, rather than trusting his doubt about whether the philosophers know what they are talking about, he chooses to found a journal of philosophy, which he believes will enable the understanding of philosophy for common folks like himself and thus eliminate his own doubt about whether the philosophers understand philosophy.³⁶ The fact that his doubt persists to annoy him at this date, though, is evidence that he has not yet been given entirely over to the system, retaining his human concern for human matters. His subjectivity is still in misrelation to the objectivity of the system. Additionally, the student reveals that he has a humility that befits a mere human being, rather than the pretenses of a celebrity philosopher and writer.

³⁵ SKS 4, 510 / P, 49.

³⁶ SKS 4, 512 / P, 51.

He confesses that his journal will have greater reason to struggle since he is not as great as J. L. Heiberg. His position, he says, is “in no way advantageous. I am not Prof. Heiberg. Indeed, not being Prof. Heiberg, I am even less than that, I am only John Doe.”³⁷ The student is embarrassed that he is not the great Prof. Heiberg but is merely an individual with no name or renown—without realizing that that is precisely his glory and his advantage over Heiberg! To be a mere existing human, should he learn to be satisfied with that lot, would be of great benefit to him.³⁸ Kierkegaard so identifies with this sentiment and its contrast with the prideful Heiberg that an earlier draft of the work removed the Danish shorthand for “John Doe” and had the passage say, “I am even less than that, I am only Mag. Kierkegaard.”³⁹ The student, then, for all of his naïve confidence in the powers of philosophy, is portrayed with some sympathy since he at least shows an earnestness and attentiveness to his life that the crowd and Heiberg do not, and his humility is certainly an advance over the public’s pride and quest for recognition. The student has the promise, at least, of subjective development.

Heiberg, by contrast, does not show the same promise, being more interested in abstractions and objective pronouncements, which one finds in the philosophical system or in astronomy, than in subjective terrestrial concerns:

But let the result be what it may, it is already glorious to envisage Herr Prof. [Heiberg] when he stands there and prophetically gazes far away until he catches a glimpse of the system and the realization of long contemplated plans; or when, as in these latter days, he fixes his eyes on heavenly things, counts the stars, reckons their courses, and watches for the heavenly inhabitants of those distant planets, forgetting the earth and earthly life, states, kingdoms, lands, associations,

³⁷ *SKS* 4, 509 / *P*, 48.

³⁸ See *SKS* 259ff. / *UDVS*, 159ff.

³⁹ *Pap.* V B 96:18 / *P*, 120. In another similarity between Kierkegaard and the student, at one point the former had considered publishing a philosophical or intellectual periodical himself (*P*, xi).

and individuals over the matchless discovery that also in the astronomical sense the earth has a very respectable place in the heavens.⁴⁰

Heiberg, of course, believes that his grand interests are an advantage to him, failing to see that even the humble student's small concerns for living are an advance over Heiberg's attempted objective posturing. His high-toned focus shows the public that he is far beyond the commonplaces of finite human concern, be they the human concerns of others or of himself. As *Postscript* would point out, it is deeply comic for a mere mortal to forget that he is merely mortal or to be so uninterested in being mortal that he abandons the attendant human concerns that come with that recognition. Such a failure shows a stunted subjectivity, which Kierkegaard links to having a sense for the comic. The joke, then, is on Heiberg because he cannot rightly perceive the comic. Preface IV suggests that one must be grateful for Heiberg who "these days...makes jests and jokes at New Year's time and does it so well that he himself believes it is earnestness."⁴¹ One is grateful to Heiberg since he provides so much to laugh at, precisely because he is so astonishingly incapable of telling what is and is not a joke. Heiberg very earnestly provides a New Year's gift to the public without realizing that his claiming to satisfy the demand of the times is a joke, and his dainty and pompous publication lampoons itself the more it seems to be done without levity. Heiberg has made a great jest and foolishly takes it and himself with obtuse earnestness. His failure to recognize the jest that is there makes him appear more comical still, so that the great contradiction between the grandness of his self-presentation and the foolishness of what he delivers is heightened by his comic failure to understand himself sufficiently to know what he has done. One

⁴⁰ SKS 4, 487 / P, 24.

⁴¹ SKS 4, 488 / P, 25.

laughs as Heiberg succumbs to comic judgment. As also shown in *Postscript*, *Prefaces* perceives that the true earnestness of living a life of human existence and of indicating to the reader Hegelian philosophy's incompatibility with that human existence both lie behind the comic silliness of the present work. These earnest commitments are distinguished from a "fatuous seriousness"⁴² that foolishly takes dreadfully seriously that which is merely a lark and a jest. As in the case of Heiberg, the failure to recognize the comic where it lies is simply a heightening of the comic by drawing the fatuously serious one into the butt of the laughter.⁴³ It measures and judges Heiberg's subjective depth, finding it lacking.

Additional Similarities in Content and Form between Prefaces and Postscript

Consequently, one observes much similarity between *Prefaces* and *Postscript* in their respective understanding and use of the comic, despite being written under different pseudonyms. Indeed, just as *Postscript* defines the comic as a contradiction, the earlier *Prefaces* speaks of a "collision" that is "very droll for the observer."⁴⁴ Moreover, *Prefaces* uses several specific comic illustrations that it shares with *Postscript*, such as its comparison of writing a preface to "sharpening a scythe,"⁴⁵ the allusion to Hamlet's

⁴² SKS 4, 503 / P, 42. This is referred to as "obtuse earnestness" in *Postscript*.

⁴³ "To regard every light breeze of the times as a hint from Governance that is important for what he is to do...this is either a jest, and as such quite amusing at times, or it is earnestness, and as such a nonsensical jest, and the more nonsensical the more complete the lunacy is" (SKS 4, 504 / P, 43).

⁴⁴ SKS 4, 468 / P, 3.

⁴⁵ SKS 4, 469 / P, 5; SKS 7, 256-57 / CUP 1, 282.

swearing on the fire tongs,⁴⁶ the invoking of the busy trifler from Holberg's *Stundesløse*,⁴⁷ and the canceling of distinctions in "a higher lunacy."⁴⁸

Further, it is not in content alone that *Prefaces* evidences an understanding of the comic similar to that which has been exegeted from *Postscript*. The form of *Prefaces*, though different from that of *Postscript*, is also worth considering. I will mention five formal similarities between *Prefaces* and *Postscript*.

1) *Both preface and postscript are subsections of a book.* Both a preface and a postscript are subsections of a book that do not typically stand on their own. By their nature, they are some additional authorial commentary for what is putatively the main

⁴⁶ SKS 4, 478 / P, 14; SKS 7, 466.1 / CUP 1, 514n.

⁴⁷ SKS 4, 488 / P, 25; SKS 7, 466.1 / CUP 1, 514n.

⁴⁸ SKS 4, 499 / P, 37; SKS 7, 407 / CUP 1, 448. Such a cancelling of distinctions in order to raise things to a higher lunacy is often associated with Hegelian mediation. Cf. SKS 4, 216 / PF, 6; EE:195 / JP 2, 1581.

Additionally, in *Prefaces*, as in *Postscript*, it is suggested that sophisticated philosophical ideas like mediation and comprehending all of reality in a philosophical system might make sense to God alone, but they certainly do not make sense to mere existing human beings: "If mediation were really all that it is made out to be, then there is probably only one power that knows how to use it with substance and emphasis; that is the power that governs all things. And there is only one language in which it belongs, the language that is used in that council of divinity to which philosophers send delegates no more than small landholders do, and from which philosophers receive regular couriers no more than small landholders do" (SKS 4, 497-8 / P, 35-36). Climacus concedes that for God it may well be said that existence is a system (SKS 7, 114 / CUP 1, 118), that outer and inner are commensurable (SKS 7, 131 / CUP 1, 141), and that truth is the agreement between thinking and being (SKS 7, 175 / CUP 1, 190). He insists, however, that "it is not that way for any existing spirit, because the spirit, itself existing, is in the process of becoming" (*Ibid*). Even if it can be said of God, it cannot be said of us in temporal existence, whatever our intelligence.

For another similarity in using a comic image, it is worth noting that in *Prefaces* Kierkegaard again makes use of the "posthorn" image (SKS 4, 469 / P, 5), famously presented in *Repetition* (SKS 4, 48-49 / R, 175-76).

On another note, in *Prefaces*, one sees a couple examples of the comic that seem to be somewhat off-color, an atypical practice for Kierkegaard. In Preface I, allusion is made to the ancient Hebrew practice of making a solemn vow by placing one's hand near another man's testicles (See Genesis 24:2; 24:9; 47:29) (SKS 4, 478 / P, 14). In Preface VII, the disappointment of philosophical mediation's failing to live up to its promises is compared to a man at a carnival trying to look into the lens of a peep show that fails to show the desired scene (SKS 4, 498-99 / P, 36-37). This latter example may simply indicate a sensational sight, such as a mountain range or a man performing acrobatics, and not necessarily anything more suggestive.

text. In Kierkegaard's hands, though, the preface and the postscript are caused to function in a manner comically different from the reader's normal expectations for them. While a postscript might be expected to be a final word or two on a topic that has already been covered in depth, Kierkegaard's *Postscript* is strikingly large, swelling to several times longer than *Philosophical Fragments*, to which it claims to be merely a postscript. While a preface might be expected to be an introductory note to a matter to be treated at length, Kierkegaard's *Prefaces* is in fact a collection of various prefaces, none of which is attached to the substance of a main text. It is expectation without payoff—as absurd as doffing one's hat without greeting anybody.⁴⁹ Nicolaus Notabene describes break between preface and book in such stark and deliberate terms that it is as if the preface gave the book “a decree of divorce.”⁵⁰

2) *Both are self-effacing and modest forms.* In addition to the fact that Kierkegaard surprises his readers by causing both preface and postscript to stand alone, he chooses two literary forms that are self-effacing and deliberately uses them for his important work. Who could expect very much from a mere postscript or a mere preface? To make entire books composed of these vestigial elements shows the strength of Kierkegaard's comic sense and also his craftiness in picking literary forms that would catch his readers' off guard, sneaking behind their defenses. The reader is given a clue to this entire strategy by encountering these opening lines to *Prefaces*:

It is a frequently corroborated experience that a triviality, a little thing, a careless utterance, an unguarded exclamation, a casual glance, an involuntary gesture have provided the opportunity to slip into a person and discover something that has

⁴⁹ SKS 4, 469 / P, 5.

⁵⁰ SKS 4, 468 / P, 4.

escaped more careful observation. Lest, however, this insignificant remark be distorted and become pompous, I shall for the moment forego further pursuit of it and get on with my project.⁵¹

Kierkegaard shows himself to be a master of presenting his ideas. The clue is that a little thing or careless utterance, like a preface, may have power to penetrate and expose precisely because it is so easily overlooked. Making this penetrating point, though, he knows better than to draw undue direct attention towards it. Instead he draws attention to it indirectly by waving it away as an insignificant remark—immediately after having noted the power and illumination that can lie in such an “insignificant” remark. His presentation is consonant with his message, regarding the potential significance of insignificant things. Prefaces and postscripts are trivial little things, surely of no consequence to anyone, particularly anyone who has set upon the importance of world-historical matters like the system. The authors of both works are, moreover, described as light-minded and a little lazy,⁵² and who could expect an earnest and ameliorative product from one such as that?⁵³

3) *Both forms are “unscientific.”* Both *Prefaces* and *Postscript*, due in part to their form, qualify as “unscientific” works. That is, they are not rigorously systematic works of objective analysis. They are self-consciously slapdash or conversational,

⁵¹ SKS 4, 467 / P, 3.

⁵² SKS 4, 470 / P, 6; SKS 7, 170-72 / CUP 1, 185-86.

⁵³ There is a similar point in the name of the pseudonym Nicolaus Notabene. “Notabene” indicates a footnote, and his name is another indication that his works, like he himself, are really merely an insignificant little point, situated at best around the periphery of a great book itself, surely not rivaling anything to the degree of importance in a book itself, which so often seeks to satisfy the demand of the times. No, *Prefaces* is merely “light reading,” so do not expect too much from it. On the other hand, Notabene literally means, “Note well,” which could be an indication of the earnest instruction and caution that lies within this seemingly light-minded footnote of a man. There could well be earnestness that comes with this jest.

revealing their author's whims and interests more than a structured treatment of a topic that, as a matter of principle, seeks to prevent the author's particular subjectivities from entering too much into the discussion. These are not the works of acknowledged professionals in the field but of amateurs, reflecting all of the love and passion that the etymology of "amateur" implies. Their component parts have a piecemeal quality that makes them feel somewhat fragmentary or disjunctive, rather than smoothly unrolling into a rational system.⁵⁴

4) *Both forms serve well to oppose the Hegelian system.* Because *Prefaces* and *Postscript* are both literary pieces that stand alone from their correlating books, are both self-effacing in a way that does not befit a book that seeks to fulfill the demand of the times, and are both abysmally unscientific works, they are excellently designed to oppose the continuous and comprehensive smoothness of the self-important Hegelian system.⁵⁵ Again, it is not their content alone but also their form that opposes system. Both works seem to be the expression of the sentiment found in Preface VII, where if, contrary to expectation, the systematicians should take an interest in such a work, one request is made: "Just one appeal, an imploring request—do with the book and with me as you will, but I beg and entreat you only this: do not with the aid of mediation put me into the systematic bric-a-brac box. I have a fear of mediation. I cannot help it.... My frame, my

⁵⁴ A similar comment could be made about *Philosophical Fragments*, for example, which bears a title that is similarly opposed to systematic sensibilities. The title *Either/Or* also resists the impulse of systematic mediation.

⁵⁵ Kierkegaard believes that this fragmentary quality that resists the smooth unfolding of Hegel's logical system brings it closer to human existence: "[E]xistence is the very separation which prevents the purely logical flow" (*Pap.* VI B 98:45 / *JP* 2, 1610).

health, my entire constitution do not lend themselves to mediation.”⁵⁶ The constitution of both Notabene and Climacus themselves as well as the constitution of their unsystematic and fragmentary works do not lend themselves to being reduced to a paragraph in the Hegelian system as it sweeps through time and space, repackaging all it finds into digestible form. In fact, Kierkegaard goes to great lengths to describe Notabene and Climacus as particular people, with histories, preferences, and strengths as well as foibles and flaws,⁵⁷ and it is precisely these particularities of character that would be lost if, somehow, their texts were able to be mediated into the system. Kierkegaard devised pseudonyms whose works would be utterly obliterated and ruined by an attempt to steamroll them into the system, which should give rise to the question: Is it truly possible to accommodate *any* particular human being and his thought into the Hegelian system without ruining or altering it? Is the system itself antithetical not just to these two individuals but to any human being?

5) *Both forms express their located origins.* Not only does the particularity of the works set them against absorption into the system as abstract exemplary types, it also gives the works an accidental quality, rooted in a particular context and conveyed from the life of a particular author at a particular time, that underscores the deception of those writers who present a work that supposedly is a work of objectivity or universal authority. The qualities of accident and particularity give the lie to the presumption of

⁵⁶ SKS 4, 506 / P, 44-45.

⁵⁷ Notabene is a married man whose wife is, amusingly, hostile to his attempts to write (SKS 4, 470-76 / P, 6-12). Climacus is a student who smokes, lounges at cafés and overhears the occasional conversation of others (SKS 7, 170-72 / CUP 1, 185-86). That one would have a constitution incompatible with mediation is confessed as possibly being a “flaw,” though doubtless this acknowledgement is one that Kierkegaard believes, in truth, to be a strength (SKS 4, 506 / P, 45).

objectivity by rooting the text into a context and giving it a history and provenance that is an embarrassing reminder of its temporal situatedness. Notabene writes, “A preface is a mood,”⁵⁸ also saying, “Prologues are characterized by the accidental, like dialects, idioms, colloquialisms; they are dominated by fashion.... Now they are long, now short; now bold, now shy; now stiffly formal, now slapdash; now worried and almost repentant, now self-confident and almost brash.”⁵⁹ Climacus agrees, suggesting that a preface, like the author’s name and the date published, is a reminder of the text’s temporal origination.⁶⁰ They have character, and that character is an expression of the author’s subjectivity and temporal and geographical location. Consider the current fashion of including some kind of prefatory note where a “thank you” list is offered to various people. One is reminded, in a sometimes embarrassingly personal way, that this author is a human being who has, say, a wife, children, a mother who supported him as he spent years studying and writing, a professor who inspired and directed him, colleagues who were kind and insightful enough to offer helpful advice and critiques, etc. Even the confession that an author might have need of such critiques, including grammatical proofreading, is a confession of fallibility and humanity that offers some relativizing note

⁵⁸ *SKS* 4, 469 / *P*, 5.

⁵⁹ *SKS* 4, 467 / *P*, 3. In this section, Notabene appears to use “prologue” and “preface” interchangeably.

⁶⁰ Climacus suggests that Hegel would have been less obviously inconsistent if he had instead published his *Logic* as “Pure Thinking” and not have included a preface and other existentially locating elements. As it is, though, Hegel’s form of presenting his argument is in conflict with his content, and the contradiction makes a comical impression, “just as if a man were to exhibit a letter fallen from heaven and then even left the blotting paper lying in it, which would all too clearly indicate that the letter from heaven had come to existence on earth” (*SKS* 7, 304 / *CUP* 1, 332-33). That Kierkegaard understands the preface to be something that testifies to the work’s concrete and temporal location is indicated by the fact that this comment in *Postscript* on the elements that a book should contain, a prominent theme in *Prefaces*, follows immediately after a discussion of what it means to exist and the relationship between thinking and being. Cf. *JJ*:265 / *JP* 2, 1605.

regarding any pretense to finality. He is a person in a location, in a time, with certain gifts and lacking others. He is irreducibly particular (however else he may appear when the work itself gets rolling).

The Particularity of the Prefaces Comically Exposes False Claims to Objectivity

One of the claims of the Hegelian philosophers that Kierkegaard delighted in ridiculing the most was their claim that they began their philosophy “with nothing.” That is, in service to objective thought and in a reworking of Descartes’ supposed philosophical method,⁶¹ these philosophers abandoned all of their personal biases, characteristics, and cultural and religious assumptions in order to begin following what neutral reason alone would dictate for them to conclude. Kierkegaard thinks that this would be extraordinarily difficult to do (despite the fact that so many of his day claimed simply to have done it), perhaps even impossible to do, and would, in any case, be unadvisable and inhuman even if it were possible. Kierkegaard chooses to begin not with the abstraction of nothing but with the concretion of a preface. Cleverly, his tactic is not to respond in kind philosophically but to deal with the issue comically by using the pedantic and insignificant preface. Notabene discusses how the contemporary quest for an objective system that begins with nothing is bad news for the preface:

The preface has received its deathblow in recent scholarship. Looked at from its point of view, an older author easily becomes a pitiful figure over whom one does not know whether to laugh or to cry, because his halting manner in getting to the point makes him comic, and his naïveté, as if there were anyone who cared about him, makes him pathetic. Nowadays a situation like this cannot be repeated, because when one begins the book with the subject and the system with nothing there apparently is nothing left over to say in a prologue.⁶²

⁶¹ Cf. SKS 4, 506 / P, 45.

⁶² SKS 4, 468 / P, 4.

How can one have prefaces at all when the goal is to escape the very particularity and accidental character that the preface must have? A preface could only be an embarrassing reminder that the author is an existing human being and not the disembodied voice of reason that he implies he is. Consequently, Kierkegaard, delighting in existence and in exposing the comic nature of claims to objectivity, writes a whole book of prefaces!

Underscoring the embodied nature of prefaces is an attempt to win one of two responses from the reader who might then turn from *Prefaces* to read one of these contributions to the system. On the one hand, if the philosopher happens to include a preface to his work of objective philosophy beginning with nothing, then the entire work is exposed as comic since the objective character of the main text is seen to be in contradiction with the subjective character of his own preface. The reader is alerted to the point that the author he is reading is a mere human being who should not be immediately submitted to as if he were reason embodied nor, perhaps, trusted much at all if the author was able to convince himself of this folly. The more objective the author tries to become, the more comical his attempts appear, since he cannot escape his own embodied existence. Such a contradiction in the text will likely be “very droll for the observer,”⁶³ and the belief that even such a learned philosopher can begin with nothing in order to take flight objectively will be undermined in the comic contradiction.

On the other hand, if the philosopher drops a preface altogether, jumping right into his subject and/or starting the system with nothing, then the reader will have been alerted to what is lacking, and the contradiction of the philosopher’s trying to claim the

⁶³ SKS 4, 468 / P, 3.

high ground of objectivity by omitting any insight into his own subjective condition will have a similar comical effect. The comic contradiction, which without reading *Prefaces* could easily have gone unnoticed, becomes evident since the reader has been made aware that the subjectivity lacking from any kind of preface to the work must nevertheless be present in the author's own life, even if he has attempted to hide it from the reader's gaze. Now the reader can supply the contrasting norm to give rise to the comic, even if no preface exists to provide it for the text in a more obvious way.

By collecting several prefaces together in order to give them a book of their own, Notabene underscores that his contemporaries have rejected such prefaces. The heavy emphasis on prefaces in this work makes all the more obvious their absence from other works. Although the many particularities of life that are incommensurable with the system must be shorn off and excised to feed the process of philosophical mediation, Notabene has very charitably collected such odds and ends in order to give them a home in this book: "The incommensurable, which in an earlier period was placed in the preface to a book, can now find its place in a preface that is not the preface to any book."⁶⁴ *Prefaces* is a kind of orphanage for abandoned subjectivities.

Notabene draws attention to the comic nature of the claim that a work of objectivity could exist apart from any interference from a human subjectivity by pointing to the contemporary tendency of a book to try to exist apart from any interference from a preface. Then he heightens this comic contradiction by claiming to find this condition to be a suitable arrangement, insisting that the book and the preface should give one another

⁶⁴ SKS 4, 468 / P, 4.

“a decree of divorce.”⁶⁵ One can imagine the wounded preface opining, “Fine, book. Who needs you! I’m just as self-sufficient as you are.” Therein lies the power in the comic critique. It is just as comically ridiculous to have an objectivity so self-sufficient that it has no need of fraternizing with human subjectivity as it is to have a pure subjectivity existing self-sufficiently and independently of all subject matter and objective content. In Kierkegaard’s context, however, the comic contradiction of a self-sufficient objectivity was not an obvious matter, so he made its comic contradiction obvious by emphasizing the far more accessible side of the same contradiction, namely that of a self-sufficient subjectivity. This is why Notabene says, “The preface as such, the liberated preface, must then have no subject to treat but must deal with nothing, and insofar as it seems to discuss something and deal with something, this must nevertheless be an illusion and a fictitious motion.”⁶⁶ When the reader is tempted to think that surely a preface must be addressing *some* subject matter, he is led to infer that so too surely a book must have *some* subjective elements. The comic craziness of a book of nothing but prefaces points to their having been divorced from their books, which indirectly points to the modern divorce between existing and thinking.⁶⁷ Such a divorce is a problem, and to advocate for it is comical, whether the suggestion comes from Notabene’s side in favor of independently existing prefaces or from the Hegelian philosopher’s side in favor of objective reason that begins with nothing. The divorce, in fact, renders both sides absurd since both are required, and Kierkegaard shows that he has an agenda in his use of the

⁶⁵ SKS 4, 468 / P, 4.

⁶⁶ SKS 4, 469 / P, 5.

⁶⁷ Cf. SKS 7, 226-27 / CUP 1, 249-50.

comic. Notabene and his prefaces are a like jester that he parades out, winning laughs at his comic ridiculousness and getting the audience to laugh at their own foolishness, knowingly or not. This book becomes the occasion for readers to realize that they have themselves become comic by accepting an unacceptable divorce between existing and thinking. Specifically, they have accepted a divorce from their subjective development in favor of a chimerical objectivity. It is just as absurd to have a book of nothing but prefaces as it is for a scholar to write a work of objective thought that pretends he does not require a preface—that is, a work that pretends he is not human.

In a different but related way, a postscript also shows that something has slipped out that did not make it into the preceding work of systematic thought.⁶⁸ Some final note, some little point of advice, some qualification of previous statements, or some word for the future gets added at the end, and it can have a humanizing effect, not unlike a little “P.S.” at the end of a letter. In the case of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, this little final word has swelled well beyond the length of the main text, and it perhaps gestures to the emphasis being placed on subjectivity as opposed to the supposedly more important subject of the main text. It is a reminder that the text does not end with a decidedly tiny conclusion, as if all of existence were contained within the book, but that a remainder is left over, the unevenness and incommensurability of existing. With *Prefaces*, the existential sting is given at the beginning; with *Postscript*, it is given at the end.⁶⁹ *Postscript* ridicules objectivity from the other side. *Postscript* refuses to allow that it has delivered one objective answer and so its postscript distances the purported author

⁶⁸ Both *Prefaces* and *Postscript*, comically, have their own respective postscripts.

⁶⁹ Cf. JJ:482 / JP 4, 4266.

Johannes Climacus from the reader by use of a revocation.⁷⁰ *Prefaces* makes a similar point from the other end by having a preface refuse to predetermine the reader's reception of this text beforehand.⁷¹ Let none think that the conveying of rote information is all that has been required and that the task, now that the information has been successfully dispensed, is closed. What is really desired, by both *Prefaces* and *Postscript*, is the provocation of the reader to existential reflection and to the development and appropriation of the reader's own subjectivity in light of ethical and religious considerations.⁷²

Summary

Although *Prefaces* at first appears to be an absurdly silly book, its comic power is, upon closer inspection, revealed to derive from an earnestly held norm about the incompatibility of the Hegelian system with human existence. Additionally, the jesting of *Prefaces* is shown to be an earnest concern that its readers would not fall for the foolishness in their culture but would come to make wiser decisions concerning their lives. It does so by putting on the mantle of a trivial jest, hoping to induct its readers into its serious concerns through the indirect means of comic laughter. Precisely because a preface is small and insignificant—just “light reading”—it can sneak between the cracks in the Hegelian system, and it hopes, similarly, to sneak between the cracks in its reader's

⁷⁰ *SKS* 7, 562 / *CUP* 1, 619.

⁷¹ “My dear reader, if I were not accustomed to writing a preface to all my books, I could just as well not have written this one, because it does not in any way pertain to the book, which, both with and without a preface, since it is indeed both, entrusts itself completely to you” (*SKS* 4, 488 / *P*, 26). Cf. *SKS* 4, 467 / *P*, 3.

⁷² Nichol has the savvy to note that if what Nicolaus Notabene says is true, that writing a preface is like ringing someone's doorbell to trick him, then the reader of *Prefaces* “can expect to meet only himself or herself on the doorstep” (*P*, xvii).

relaxed defenses. In this way, the conception of the comic that operates in *Prefaces* is shown to be like that examined in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, where the comic is also polemical, evidenced by a contradiction between earnest norms, and potentially formative by inciting laughter. In the case of *Prefaces*, the way out is the hope that the prestige of Hegelian thought will be rejected in favor of the adventure of living a normal human life. Very like prefaces, human lives are fragmentary, unscientific, accidental, located in a context, distant from the perfection of objective closure, and fundamentally opposed to Hegelian mediation.

Notabene ironically highlights the comically contradictory claims of Hegelian objectivity by granting its attempt to be distanced from subjectivity and particularity, symbolized by the prefaces. If the objective book desires to be divorced from the subjective little preface, so be it. In much the same way that the naïve student of Preface VIII becomes a satire on Hegelianism by trying to follow through Hegelian philosophy consistently—more consistently than those Hegelians who claim to have done so much so simply—the book of *Prefaces* similarly takes the comical contradiction that the objective philosophers have begun by rejecting subjective concerns and radicalizes it, following through with the comic position even more consistently than the philosophers themselves would. Notabene says, “The most recent scholarly method has made me aware that it would have to come to a break. My merit will be this, to make the break in earnest; now there is only a phenomenon that points to the deeper reason.”⁷³ Notabene takes this break, which is comically incoherent, and clarifies and heightens it by giving the abandoned prefaces a home of their own. He heightens the comic, then, “in earnest,”

⁷³ SKS 4, 468 / P, 4.

which leaves one with a work that is a comic phenomenon that also points to the deep and earnest reason for its comedy. Philosophical principles are at stake. Graver still, the ways of human lives are at stake. Whether operating through the tactic of the sympathetically naïve student of Preface VIII or the unsympathetically pompous Heiberg, *Prefaces* is a comic work grounded upon some very earnest norms, and it is aggressive in its comic judgment of the perceived problem.

Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits: *a Religious Expression of the Comic*

If *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846) is considered to be the final contribution to Kierkegaard's "first authorship," at one point intended to be Kierkegaard's final published work, then *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (1847) may be considered to be the first proper work in Kierkegaard's "second authorship." The unexpected *Corsair* affair⁷⁴ prevented Kierkegaard from retiring from writing, perhaps to pastor a small country church,⁷⁵ and seems to have impelled him to another leg of writing that is more overtly religious than his earlier writings.⁷⁶ *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirit*, then, was written amidst the contested atmosphere of the *Corsair* affair.

⁷⁴ "Soon that second idea popped up again (a rural pastor). I intended to finish writing as quickly as possible—and then become a rural pastor. With every new book I thought: Now you must stop. I felt this most strongly in connection with *Concluding Postscript*. At this point I meant to stop—then I wrote the lines about *The Corsair*" (NB28:54 / JP 6, 6843).

⁷⁵ "It is now my intention to qualify as a pastor. For several months I have been praying to God to keep on helping me, for it has been clear to me for some time now that I ought not to be a writer any longer, something I can be only totally or not at all" (JJ:415 / JP 5, 5873).

⁷⁶ The Hongs note that the subtitle "Christian Discourses" is used for the first time in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (UDVS, xi. See SKS 8, 313 / UDVS, 213).

In seeking evidence of Kierkegaard's view of the comic in his corpus, it is important to examine not just his pseudonymous publications, such as *Prefaces* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* but also works written under Kierkegaard's own name. Many of his journal entries have been examined and will continue to prove useful, but they were not published by Kierkegaard in his lifetime. *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, on the other hand, is a member in full standing of Kierkegaard's authorship and is published under his own name. What is more, it deserves consideration because it is an example of Kierkegaard's "discourses," which have been a comparatively under-examined section of Kierkegaard's corpus, and because it will be profitable to see how Kierkegaard treats the comic in the context of his edifying and religious writing. It is far from the case that Kierkegaard would eschew the use of irony and humor in a "serious" work such as this, as one might suppose.

Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits is composed of three parts: "An Occasional Discourse," "What We Learn from the Lilies in the Field and from the Birds of the Air," and "The Gospel of Sufferings." That the comic is essential to Kierkegaard's composition of these three parts may be seen in an illuminating journal entry, which will be used to inform the reading of this work.⁷⁷ Here, Kierkegaard identifies part one with the ironic and part two with the humorous.⁷⁸ A reader unfamiliar with Kierkegaard's categories may indeed find elements of irony and humor in the two parts but would probably be surprised to read Kierkegaard's commentary on his writings since *prima*

⁷⁷ NB:129 / *UDVS*, 388-90.

⁷⁸ He does not say much about part three in this journal entry, though others may be found where it is discussed (E.g., NB:120 / *UDVS*, 388). In any case, part three is not essentially identified with a comic form as the first two are, though it does contain comic elements in itself. I will give greater focus to parts one and two because of their explicit characterization by irony and humor, respectively.

facie they do not meet one's expectations of what works of irony and humor would be expected to look like. Nevertheless, let us examine these two parts in turn to see in what respect they may be characterized by Kierkegaard's understanding of irony and humor.

Part One: "An Occasional Discourse"

Of part one, Kierkegaard writes, "The design is essentially ethical-ironic and thereby upbuilding, Socratic. The most ironic category (which, please note, is also the absolutely moral category) is singleness, that single individual."⁷⁹ By calling part one "ethical-ironic" Kierkegaard is emphasizing the ethical border to the *confinium* of irony rather than the aesthetic one. That is, this irony is ordered toward cultivating a subjectivity towards existence in the ethical sphere, which is why it is "upbuilding."⁸⁰ As argued earlier, Kierkegaard believes that irony edifies one by isolating one from the multiplicity of the crowd and by inciting one's development into the single individual. Irony cultivates singleness,⁸¹ which is why irony is not merely an aesthetic device or,

⁷⁹ NB:129 / UDVS, 388.

⁸⁰ That Kierkegaard can characterize this as "Socratic" shows how much he has changed in his estimation of Socrates' irony from his dissertation.

⁸¹ One might think, judging by Kierkegaard's presentations of "the ethical" in early works such as *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling* that the ethical is to be associated *Sittlichkeit*, with societal norms and expectations. How then does it make sense to say that irony, which borders on the ethical and facilitates existential transfer from the aesthetic to the ethical, cultivates singleness? While it is true that, especially in early writings, Kierkegaard can be seen to associate the ethical with social bourgeois morality, against which the religious is favorably contrasted, certainly by the time of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* "the ethical" comes to mean a category for singleness and individuality: "Ethics focuses upon the individual" (SKS 7, 316 / CUP 1, 346; SKS 7, 519-20 / CUP 1, 571-72. Cf. C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], 87-89; W. Glenn Kirkconnell, *Kierkegaard on Sin and Salvation: From Philosophical Fragments through the Two Ages* [New York: Continuum, 2010], 85). The ethical individual is in view for "the ethical," which makes better sense given irony's cultivation of singleness. In *Postscript*, Hegelian philosophy is not associated with the ethical, supporting *Sittlichkeit*, but is associated with the aesthetic and given sub-ethical standing (SKS 7, 270.1 / CUP 1, 296n).

worse, an evasion from earnestness but, rather, is “the absolutely moral category.”

Morality and the comic, again, are intimately tied for Kierkegaard.

Part one is “An Occasional Discourse,” and one soon learns that the occasion referred to is the occasion of a confession.⁸² In other words, Kierkegaard does not believe that the irony that characterizes this part is incompatible with the religious theme of repenting of and confessing one’s sins. Indeed, irony is a positive aid. Kierkegaard prays that God would “give in repentance the bold confidence to will again one thing.”⁸³ If sin succumbs to the separation and multiplicity of life, repentance seeks to return to willing “one thing,” and irony trains one in the purity of single willing.⁸⁴ Also, confession requires a preparation that “divest[s] oneself of multiplicity in order to make up one’s mind about one thing, to interrupt the pace of busy activity in order to put on the repose of contemplation in unity with oneself.... [O]ne cannot *confess* without this unity with oneself.”⁸⁵ The ironic and upbuilding character of part one, then, is intimately associated with the Christian practice of confession and repentance. One must be divested of multiplicity as preparation for confession, and in repentance one is given “the

⁸² SKS 8, 123 / UDVS, 7.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Kierkegaard associates singleness with eternity and multiplicity with temporality, which is why eternity is what is upbuilding for human subjectivity: “only the eternal is upbuilding; the wisdom of the years is confusing” (SKS 8, 126 / UDVS, 11). It seems that Kierkegaard understands irony here to be the discovery of the contradiction between single eternity and multiplicitous temporality, with the eternal norm emerging victorious and ethical advancement thereby being promulgated. This would not be unlike the following definition of irony from *Postscript*: “The irony emerges by continually joining the particulars of the finite with the ethical infinite requirement and allowing the contradiction to come into existence” (SKS 7, 455 / CUP 1, 502). This is also the relation of ironic contradiction described in Kierkegaard’s journal entry on UDVS: “The single individual can in fact denote every person and in an eminent way every person who morally-ideally wills to be the highest.... This is the relation between facticity and ideality, which is simultaneously just as much moral and ethical as it is ironic” (NB:129 / UDVS, 388-89).

⁸⁵ SKS 8, 134 / UDVS, 19-20. Italics original.

bold confidence to will again one thing” in the future. Irony both precedes and follows Christian repentance in the divestment of multiplicity in favor of the one thing, so essential is irony for one’s Christian development.

One might object that irony seems too harsh or cutting to be appropriately associated with confession and repentance. It is true that irony, like other forms of the comic, is polemical, but that is precisely why it is salutary. If irony were less polemical, it would be less upbuilding.⁸⁶ Consider this example of irony from part one:

But, my listener, did you dare as a father...to say when you sent your child out into the world, “Just go in confidence, my child; pay attention to what the majority approve and the world rewards; it is the good, but what it punishes is the bad. Nowadays it is not as it was in the days of old.... Nowadays the outcome is no longer doubtful.... Nowadays no sacrifice is demanded, no self-denial, because the world wills the good....”⁸⁷

Kierkegaard ironically lifts to comic absurdity the idea that worldliness and majority opinion are trustworthy by imagining a father earnestly advising his son to trust them. Irony, here, is set about the task of removing multiplicity from the readers’ hearts in favor of willing one thing. If one feels the sting of Kierkegaard’s irony at times, he makes clear that any wounds given are intended only to heal: “Oh, would that the discourse might not wound anyone except for his healing...would that it might annihilate double-mindedness and win hearts for the good....”⁸⁸ This description, which Kierkegaard

⁸⁶ “[B]ecause of course differential presuppositions are required in order to pursue dialectical developments completely” (NB:129 / *UDVS*, 389).

⁸⁷ *SKS* 8, 166 / *UDVS*, 56.

⁸⁸ *SKS* 8, 149 / *UDVS*, 36. The quotation continues, saying that he wants the discourse to win hearts for the good but “not by persuasion, since this also is very easily double-minded” and to long for the pleasure of persuasion is a way of forgetting the task (*Ibid*). Similarly, it should be noted that Kierkegaard’s understanding of the comic is not “persuasive” in a rhetorically reasoned and discursive way. It forms using deep norms set in contradiction to others, and one is often carried over the gap in laughter without even realizing that one is shifting convictions subtly.

Kierkegaard explains that his Christian discourses do not try to convince through persuasion because of the nature of Christianity: “Christianity certainly is a fact but the kind of fact that can only be

applies to the discourse as a whole, is very like Climacus' definition of the comic as a contradiction with a way out. The pain that is present is oriented towards healing.⁸⁹

Kierkegaard's discourse is on a mission to track down error,⁹⁰ and truth has the right to call out untruth for the purpose of healing.⁹¹ For these purposes, he enlists irony against the errors of multiplicity and double-mindedness, and, as a form of the comic, any pain that irony brings in its polemics has a way out that leads to upbuilding.

Consequently, of this discourse Kierkegaard says, "This comic tone is absolutely essential."⁹² Note that the "comic tone" of the discourse indicates more than merely the inclusion of discrete comic examples, although these may be found.⁹³ The entire discourse has an ethical-ironic "design" that is ordered towards ethical upbuilding.⁹⁴

believed, with the result that it can only be talked about or preached about—witnessed not to its being true (for this is the relation of secular wisdom to its various objects), but witnessed to the fact that one *believes* it is true" (NB:110 / *UDVS*, 384-85). One is reminded of a later dictum attributed to Karl Barth: "Belief cannot argue with unbelief, it can only preach to it."

In this way, the comic at its best resembles a living witness or preaching, convincing or compelling in a manner other than discursive reasoning that one decides to assent to. The comic grabs one existentially and forces a choice in one's life. To laugh or to be offended is not an objective decision that one comes to after thoughtful reflection on the object in silence: "Very well, I have resolved to laugh at it. Ha!" It is in contact with one's worldview and immediacy such that a perspective is invoked, rather than a distant set of options to be dispassionately chosen between after one has published a thoughtful manuscript on the matter. Existence does not wait for our slow reflection, and the comic, as Climacus taught, locates us in existence.

⁸⁹ *SKS* 7, 465-67 / *CUP* 1, 514-16.

⁹⁰ *SKS* 8, 223 / *UDVS*, 122.

⁹¹ "Therefore let us not forget that what is true has the right to call anyone miserable who is in untruth, even when he himself and everyone else consider him happy, because from the standpoint of truth it does not help a person not to know that he is miserable, since that is only one misery more" (*SKS* 8, 164 / *UDVS*, 53-54). Kierkegaard certainly felt justified in comically critiquing others in untruth, such as the Danish Hegelians, Heiberg, P. L. Møller, and others.

⁹² NB:129 / *UDVS*, 389.

⁹³ Kierkegaard specifies two passages in the discourse that elicit ironic laughter (*Ibid.*; see *SKS* 8, 193 / *UDVS*, 88).

⁹⁴ NB:129 / *UDVS*, 388.

Two indications of this are the dedication to “that single individual”⁹⁵ and the preface’s claim that the discourse “seeks that single individual, to whom it gives itself wholly, by whom it wishes to be received as if it had arisen in his own heart.”⁹⁶ Singleness is the “most ironic category,”⁹⁷ and this is what the discourse is ordered to both in method and in hoped-for readership. Indeed, even though this discourse is characterized by irony and not humor, which borders existentially on the religious, it is still ordered towards religious upbuilding.⁹⁸ Kierkegaard has no qualms about centering his ironic theme of rejecting multiplicity in favor of singleness and inner development upon the explicitly religious element of a verse of Scripture. James 4:8 gives him his theme: “Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing.”⁹⁹ By saying that eternity’s task is to will one thing,¹⁰⁰ the capacities of irony are linked up to the demands of God. Irony, too, may have its religious relevance, and Kierkegaard shows as much here, in a confessional discourse written under his own name.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ *SKS* 8, 120 / *UDVS*, 4. Capitalization removed.

⁹⁶ *SKS* 8, 121 / *UDVS*, 5. The hope that the discourse would be received as if it had arisen in the reader’s own heart shows the degree to which Kierkegaard had in mind a reader who was a single individual, not utterly dependent upon another author, even Kierkegaard, for his inner upbuilding.

⁹⁷ *NB*:129 / *UDVS*, 388.

⁹⁸ “If we take seriously the idea that God has created and is creating each self, then we can see the task of becoming one’s self to be simultaneously the task of achieving a proper relation to God” (Evans [2004], 89-90).

⁹⁹ *SKS* 8, 138 / *UDVS*, 24. While some might take the descriptions of a work as “comic” and “ironic” to indicate that they are non-serious, in Kierkegaard’s hands here they indicate the very opposite: a contradiction oriented to the way out of subjective growth.

¹⁰⁰ *SKS* 8, 241 / *UDVS*, 144.

¹⁰¹ C. Stephen Evans has a helpful examination of this discourse, where he demonstrates the similarity (though not identity) of its view of the ethical to that of Climacus’ *Postscript* (Evans [2004], 103-11). The proximity he finds between Kierkegaard in this discourse and Climacus regarding the ethical lends indirect support to my argument about the similarity of their views of irony.

Part Two: “What We Learn from the Lilies in the Field and from the Birds of the Air”

In his journal entry discussion, Kierkegaard describes part two as “humorous” and then briefly reflects on the relationship between learner and teacher.¹⁰² He notes that a learner relates to a teacher as to a higher ideal. When the teacher stands lower than the learner, though, as when one learns from a child or a dolt, the situation becomes humorous. Even more humorous is when the lower teacher is of a different genus, lacking even the commonality that a learner has with a child. “This is the definitely humorous relation,” and in this discourse it is the lilies and the birds that serve to teach mankind humorously, being in a relation of “qualitative heterogeneity” with it.¹⁰³

Kierkegaard singles out the tale of the worried lily, which he calls, “clearly humorous.”¹⁰⁴ The tale begins charmingly: “Once upon a time there was a lily that stood in an isolated spot beside a small brook and was well known to some nettles and also to a few other small flowers nearby.”¹⁰⁵ The humble beauty is evident, and the tale is full of descriptors like “small” and “little” that indicate the low and unassuming position of our vegetal teacher. As Kierkegaard says, this humor is not harsh or uproarious but a “touching jest” that causes the reader to “smile at many points but never laugh, never laugh ironically.”¹⁰⁶ Even so, the tale that is “clearly humorous” perhaps does not fit all of our normal expectations for what would constitute a humorous tale. Most notably, the

¹⁰² NB:129 / UDVS, 389-90.

¹⁰³ NB:129 / UDVS, 390.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ SKS 8, 266 / UDVS, 167.

¹⁰⁶ NB:129 / UDVS, 390.

ending is sad.¹⁰⁷ A chattering bird comes and teaches the lily about comparison, making it dissatisfied with its humble lot. The lily has the bird fly it to a rumored place where many gorgeous lilies grow, but on the way the lily withers and dies. The tale is humorous, then, not because it is laugh-out-loud funny, but because the lowly, even a humble flower, has something to teach human beings.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, the worried lily is such a humble teacher of human beings that it teaches not just through its humility but also through its failure. It teaches us not from above, like an expert who has succeeded spectacularly at everything she tries, but from below, reminding us that we ourselves are perhaps not quite as lowly as we once thought and that it would do us well to preserve and cherish our own value as ones created by and for God. It is better to be content as a humble lily fraternizing with nettles than to destroy ourselves by aspiring to abandon our situated existence in favor of abstraction that is sure to disappoint and ruin.

Again, as in part one, although there are specific examples to evidence the humorous character,¹⁰⁹ it is the design of the entire discourse that is humorous: “On the whole, the humorous is present at every point because the design itself is humorous.”¹¹⁰ One illustration of this is that Kierkegaard compares the discourse itself to the humble, humorous teachers of the birds and the lilies. The discourse is a “little book,” as small and unimportant as our divinely appointed teachers in nature, and neither teaches from above in authority but only from below in the humorous relation of humility.

¹⁰⁷ One will recall that the ending for the naïve student of Preface VIII is also sad. That story also is not excluded from having a comic character.

¹⁰⁸ “So what does the worried person learn from the lilies? He learns to be contented with being a human being and not to be worried about diversity among human beings” (*SKS* 8, 269-70 / *UDVS*, 170).

¹⁰⁹ In addition to the worried lily, Kierkegaard also specifies the discussion on being clothed (*NB*:129 / *UDVS*, 390; see *SKS* 8, 285-86 / *UDVS*, 187-89).

¹¹⁰ *NB*:129 / *UDVS*, 390.

Kierkegaard says in the preface, “Although this little book is without the *authority* of the teacher, *a superfluity, insignificant* like the lily and the bird...yet by finding the only thing it seeks, a good place, it hopes to find the *significance of appropriation* for that single individual....”¹¹¹ When it comes to matters of ethical and religious upbuilding, the appropriation can never be forced upon the reader directly from the teacher in any event. When the teacher claims no teaching authority, however, the sheer humility of the “instruction” makes it all the more evident that appropriation depends entirely upon the reader’s self-activity. Neither, of course, can the amusement of humor be directly forced upon an audience. The amusement depends upon the existential and cognitive norms of the audience, or, at most, its openness to being won over by the winsome appeal of the humor into appropriating those norms. If one is to find edifying instruction in the words of a small child, for example, one must have both a sufficient sense of humor to entertain the appeal of the little distraction and the humility to stoop.

Light-mindedness, Heavy-mindedness, Jest, and Earnestness

Our examined journal entry¹¹² does not comment much on part three and does not associate it with a specific comic form. Part three, being explicitly labeled “Christian Discourses,”¹¹³ unlike the other two, claims a higher position on the stages of existence than do the *confinia* of irony or humor, however essential both are to one’s subjective development towards religiousness. Part three does, though, have some instructive

¹¹¹ SKS 8, 257 / UDVS, 157. One is reminded of the insignificant “light reading” of *Prefaces* that in fact holds wise instruction. Also, one thinks of the humorist Johannes Climacus who, though a little lazy and not well-respected in the world of the literati, might have a few casual observations in *Postscript* that, if taken to heart, could upend even the prestigious and authoritative Hegelianism of the day.

¹¹² NB:129 / UDVS, 388-90.

¹¹³ SKS 8, 313 / UDVS, 213.

comments on light-mindedness and heavy-mindedness that are relevant to this discussion. These will be examined and then used to segue into a broader discussion on jest and earnestness in the three parts of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*.

Kierkegaard does not believe that the comic can be so undialectically characterized as light-mindedness, and he certainly does not think that light-mindedness aptly characterizes the Christian. Recalling Kierkegaard's dour evaluation of both light-minded frivolity and the heaviness of obtuse earnestness in *Postscript*, one sees again here that both extremes prove too undialectical and extreme to be satisfactory for Christian living:

Every extreme, of heavy-mindedness or of light-mindedness, is promptly a sign that faith is not really present. Christ did not come into the world in order to make life light in the sense of light-mindedness or to make it heavy in the sense of heavy-mindedness but to lay the light burden upon the believer. The light-minded person wants to let everything be forgotten—he believes in vain; the heavy-minded person wants to let nothing be forgotten—he believes in vain. But the person who has faith believes that everything is forgotten but in such a way that he carries a light burden—because does he not carry the recollection that it is forgiven him!¹¹⁴

To translate into the language of jest and earnestness, here Kierkegaard understands light-mindedness to be an attempt to live in “pure” jest, as if such a thing were possible, and heavy-mindedness to be an attempt to live in “pure” earnestness, as if such a thing were possible. Neither are Christian. Additionally, neither understand what jest and earnestness really are or how a Christian is meant to be jesting and earnest about the same thing.

At times, Kierkegaard appears to equate jest with light-minded triviality, simply. One should take care, though. He does not believe that jest has no relation to earnestness,

¹¹⁴ SKS 8, 346 / UDVS, 246-47.

as our investigation has repeatedly shown, but he will nevertheless occasionally seem to equate jest with the purely trivial or frivolous in a given context. One could say that Kierkegaard is temporarily adopting popular conceptions of jest as mere frivolity for his rhetorical purposes. For example, he describes the attempt to fool the good for a time as a jest that will never succeed in eternity,¹¹⁵ declares eloquence, like being beautiful, to be a distracting jest¹¹⁶ that eternal earnestness puts no stock in,¹¹⁷ and says that temporal pain is only a jest in light of the comforts of eternity.¹¹⁸ One will observe that the predominant examples of this apparent equation of jest with the purely trivial occur in part one, where Kierkegaard is placing a rhetorical premium on contrasting the manifold distractions of the temporal with the single purity of the eternal. In short, temporality is a jest when compared to the earnestness of the eternal.

Despite these associations of jest with temporality, far be it from Kierkegaard to be seen to be endorsing light-minded temporal living! He is not arguing that there is no earnestness in temporal existence. Rather, he is arguing for the earnestness of eternity in contrast to the absurd preoccupations of the temporal. Eternal earnestness, then, is to *become* the earnestness of living a temporal life. Living in temporality requires, interestingly, the dismissal of temporality's claims to be taken with heavy-minded earnestness. Heaven's instruction is that in order to live temporally the temporal must be chastened. Temporality on its own gets its emphases exactly wrong, valuing the valueless and ignoring the all-important, which is why it misunderstands and

¹¹⁵ SKS 8, 193 / UDVS, 87.

¹¹⁶ SKS 8, 224 / UDVS, 123.

¹¹⁷ SKS 8, 234 / UDVS, 136.

¹¹⁸ SKS 8, 231 / UDVS, 132.

misidentifies jest and earnestness: “But busyness places an extremely earnest emphasis upon the jest and regards earnestness as nothing.”¹¹⁹ Temporality is so earnest about trivial matters and so uninterested in the truly important that to live in the temporal rightly, one must have an adversarial spirit, being righteously disrespectful of what temporality holds in such great esteem.¹²⁰ One must jest and play with the sacred objects of temporality. This jesting is not in service to light-minded jesting, nihilism, or acosmism, though, but to a higher earnestness that almost universally goes ignored. Thus, this jesting is *opposed* to light-mindedness. It seeks to unsettle those who regard eternity’s task light-mindedly.

Jest and Earnestness in “An Occasional Discourse”

In part one, Kierkegaard uses Socrates as an example of one who uses jest to oppose light-mindedness, saying, “At another time there was that simple wise man who by way of jest worked for the good. In his sagacity he knew what his light-minded people needed lest they directly take in vain the earnestness of the good....”¹²¹ Jest is not opposed to the good. In this example, jest is exactly the means that Socrates uses to work in service to the good. Because of their light-mindedness toward the good, the people would not receive the earnest higher matters that they ought to receive, so, perhaps

¹¹⁹ SKS 8, 224 / UDVS, 123. Kierkegaard says, “In temporality things can become so confused that a person does not know which is which, which question is earnest and which is frivolous—especially when the frivolous question is heard a thousand times while the earnest question is heard once” (SKS 8, 246 / UDVS, 149).

¹²⁰ Consider how many of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms live in eccentricity, are unconcerned about the demands of the age, are inattentive to matters that most are deeply concerned with, or are lazy while others busy themselves about work. Such a personality “does not go to the stock exchange to feather his nest but only strolls through it” (SKS 4, 470 / P 6).

¹²¹ SKS 8, 200-1 / UDVS, 96.

unintuitively, Socrates met this problem with jest! One might have expected the example to say that because the people light-mindedly ignored the earnestness of the good, he met this problem with intense examples of earnestness, but it is not so. Kierkegaard understands the nearly inevitable failures that will result if one who is light-minded is presented with earnestness directly. Assuming that the light-minded person will not simply continue to ignore the earnestness as he did before, the light-minded person, convinced that something must be done with the earnestness but lacking the character to appropriate it, might simply go through the motions, seeming through shallow imitation to receive directly what can only be received indirectly. In this way, he would take the earnestness “in vain.” Socrates’ presentation in the form of jest, though, is intended to subvert these types of evasion, as Kierkegaard explains: “The character of the jest prevented them from directly taking the earnestness in vain; the adverseness of the jest, on the other hand, made their light-mindedness apparent—this was the judgment. Without this sagacity, the light-minded public probably would have aped him—in being earnest. Now, however, he presented them with the choice....”¹²² Socrates’ comic jesting divided inner from outer and was used to function as an incognito. This prevented a direct appropriation of his deeper earnestness, which in truth is an impossibility by Kierkegaard’s understanding, that will necessarily result in fraud or lack of integrity if tried. Socrates uses the comic as an opportunity to face the light-minded with a decision. By struggling to decide how to understand and receive his jesting, they might find that Socrates’ earnestness towards the good is ignited within their own inner subjectivity in a way befitting existing individuals. Note, too, Kierkegaard’s ever-present polemical

¹²² SKS 8, 201 / UDVS, 96-97.

understanding of the comic, in his description of “the adverseness of the jest” which exposes their light-mindedness in a form of comic judgment. Interestingly, though in this narrative Socrates uses the method that Kierkegaard endorses, Socrates is still met with failure: “Now, however, he presented them with the choice, and lo, they chose the jest; they utterly failed to see that there was any earnestness in it—because there was no earnestness in them.”¹²³ This was a failure, though, that at least was the only way that had a chance of success, even though one can never say that it necessarily will succeed. Failing to distinguish between Socrates’ inner and outer, they could not penetrate his incognito, becoming comic in their foolishly accepting what was given only jestingly. Their failure to rise to the challenge of the jesting prompt exposes their own lack of earnestness. Being weak in the comic and misunderstanding the jest is indicative of a lack of earnestness, showing how earnestness is fundamental to the comic for Kierkegaard. Further, it supports Kierkegaard’s understanding of one’s ability with the comic being capable of locating one on the stages of existence, and the light-minded were found to be inferior to Socrates, succumbing to his comic judgment. Kierkegaard says that Socrates’ jesting art of using a comic incognito in service to the good to test for earnestness “was paganism’s supreme ingenuity.” However, Christianity “has another view,”¹²⁴ because, as much as it respects and values the comic, Christianity refuses to make the comic supreme, as Kierkegaard accused Hegel of doing. For Christianity, there is a still higher and more difficult art than the comic.

¹²³ *SKS* 8, 201 / *UDVS*, 97. The public lacked earnestness, so they necessarily failed to share the comic norms used by Socrates, holding them with sufficient earnestness, in order for his use of the comic to be effective. Socrates was, it seems, unable to get the public on the same page with him through his comic jesting.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

Jest and earnestness in “What We Learn from the Lilies in the Field and from the Birds of the Air.” In part two, jest is associated with the lily and the bird in their disruption of the mindset burdened with temporal cares. Kierkegaard says of the worried one:

[T]he Gospel urges him to go out to the field and then to stand still in order to look at the lily and the bird, so that this godly diversion might cause the fixedly staring eyes to move, might divert the mind in which the worry has become firmly fixed. Look at the lily, see how lovely it is there at your feet.... See how gentle it is, always willing to jest and to play, whereas by yielding it is victorious over the most violent storm and endures it! Look at the bird under the heavens. See how it flies....¹²⁵

The little lily and bird are “godly” diversions, jests that divert from the fixed worry of the world in the name of a higher reality. The lily and bird indirectly suggest their creator and His faithfulness to provide. Their jesting, then, is not an enemy of earnestness as such but is a disruption of a lesser, worldly, obtuse earnestness in the name of a heavenly earnestness. Their jesting opposes heavy-mindedness about the things of the world, which, Kierkegaard seems to think, is often paired with light-mindedness about one’s relationship to eternity. To place weight on temporality implies a light handling of eternity. The light jesting of the lily and the bird in the world, conversely, implies their rootedness in eternity. As in part one, jest is used to disrupt worldliness in the name of a higher, indeed eternal, good.

Jest and earnestness in “The Gospel of Sufferings.” In part three, Kierkegaard restates his belief that the world tends to conflate jest and earnestness. This time, given that part three is composed of “Christian” discourses, he illustrates his point not merely with the pagan Socrates or natural imagery but with an explicitly Christian example. He

¹²⁵ SKS 8, 284 / UDVS, 186.

says, “Unfortunately, in the confused and confusing jargon of the world, whatever is simple and earnest almost sounds at times like a jest. The person who certainly has exercised the greatest power ever exercised in the world proudly calls himself Peter’s successor. But to be Christ’s follower! Indeed, that does not tempt to pride....”¹²⁶ In this case, the emphasis is on the world’s misunderstanding the “simple and earnest” matter of being a follower of Christ as a trivial jest that is nothing to tempt the pride. Instead, the world takes earnestly the claim to be the successor of *Peter*, which is the true triviality in Kierkegaard’s view. After all, Peter is Christ’s follower! Peter himself would not have tolerated his own exaltation over Christ.¹²⁷ The comic contradiction is thus heightened by Kierkegaard here. He does not just emphasize the contradiction of esteeming a human over the God-man; he emphasizes the contradiction of esteeming a follower of Christ over Christ. This is a contradiction that the follower of Christ, Peter, would himself never have tolerated, yet the world tolerates it and thinks that they do Peter honor thereby. It is as if Kierkegaard is asking, “Why value proximity to Peter so highly? You yourself can become what Peter was: a follower of Christ.”¹²⁸ How strange to revere proximity to Peter while so lightly esteeming what he was and what he himself valued.” Note that Kierkegaard does not here accept that following Christ is a jest, only that it “sounds...like a jest” to the world. The real element of the comic here is that the world thinks the highest earnestness to be a jest! This is what Kierkegaard highlights. The world has misunderstood what true jest and true earnestness are, so they themselves

¹²⁶ *SKS* 8, 327 / *UDVS*, 226.

¹²⁷ See Acts 4:18-20; 5:29. See also the reaction of other apostles to being worshipped in Acts 14:15.

¹²⁸ See *SKS* 4, 287ff. / *PF*, 89ff.

embody a comic contradiction. It is this contradiction that Kierkegaard has the comic eye to discover and the comic facility to present in his comment, noting the pride in claiming to be Peter's successor and the lack of pride in being Christ's follower. Kierkegaard's jesting remark about the world's inconsistency shows his adversarial spirit, being righteously disrespectful of what temporality holds in such great esteem, as it was put above. Once again, Kierkegaard jests about the sacred reverence towards Peter not because he light-mindedly takes nothing, including religion, earnestly. Rather, he jests precisely because he so greatly values the simple earnestness of being a follower of Christ. His jest, with its polemical edge, comes from a place of earnestness. He therefore tolerates no rival earnestness from a worldly perspective. As in parts one and two, Kierkegaard shows that jesting disrupts the problematic so-called earnestness of worldliness. Here, it is done in the name of explicitly Christian concerns.

Summary

In this examination of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, one sees that Kierkegaard is very comfortable filling the pages even of edifying and religious works with abundant reflection on and examples of the comic. This is because his employment of the comic does not detract from his earnest concerns but is in service to them aesthetically, structurally, cognitively, and existentially. Not only does Kierkegaard use many examples of the comic in his edifying writing, he also gives parts one and two ironic and humorous designs, respectively. That is, the comic is not just illustrative of his edifying project but essential to it. The structure of the three parts, with irony leading to humor which leads to the Christian, suggests the structure of his stages of existence and

his hope that his reader would grow existentially to be formed by his discourses. The comic is integral to that formation.

Correspondingly, one observes that the theme of jest and earnestness runs through all three parts. It extends even into the Christian discourses, which suggests Kierkegaard's opinion of the importance of the comic for Christian living. For example, just as irony was shown to be essential for preparation for a confession, so does the right understanding of jest and earnestness, resisting the world's conflation by placing weight in the correct places, have its importance for forgiveness.¹²⁹ The comic trains one in one's temporal existence before God's eternity and in one's sinful existence before God's holiness. Human existence is taken with sufficient earnestness to strive sincerely, to find fault, and to repent. It is taken with sufficient jest to accept the escape of redemption and to relativize even the best human plans in light of divine governance.

Confession, repentance, and forgiveness are the lifeblood of a Christian life, and the comic is present unto them all. The comic helps one both to grow in existence and to learn one's own distance from God. Because of this, the comic's relevance to theology is also seen. Temporality mistakes and confuses jest and earnestness because it mistakes and confuses temporality and eternity. The comic training in rightly living with jest and earnestness is vital for the Christian, who uses the same dialectical skills to live in temporality but for eternity by ascribing weight to the right places.¹³⁰ Kierkegaard says

¹²⁹ "Forgiveness is not to be earned—it is not that heavy; but neither is it to be taken in vain and it is not that light either" (*SKS* 8, 345 / *UDVS*, 246).

¹³⁰ The temporal/eternal distinction gives insight into why all of Kierkegaard's forms of the comic, including jesting, retain a polemical element. One may object that the charming and touching humor of the lilies and the birds do not appear to be polemical, but they are indeed polemical because they are a means whereby eternity corrects temporality's misunderstandings. Their function as divinely appointed teachers rests on this.

that it is the earnestness of eternity that gives “infinite weight” to each individual person¹³¹ (as opposed to temporality that heavy-mindedly stares fixed at the crowds and light-mindedly disregards one’s individual relation to eternity), teaching one to learn “earnestness in order to be concerned as a single individual about his eternal responsibility.”¹³² True earnestness is, then, associated with eternity, and this earnestness exposes and consumes the trivialities and worries of life¹³³ and tasks us with willing one thing.¹³⁴ With our earnestness secured above, we may rightly and legitimately jest with the false earnestness of temporality.

The upbuilding discourses profit greatly from the comic in Kierkegaard’s hands. Consider the many earnest elements and structures that stand behind his employment of the comic: the nature of human existence, the dwelling of God in eternity and its contrast with temporality, the hierarchical stages of existence, Christian practices of repentance, etc. There is an entire worldview that supports the Kierkegaardian comic, and a mistaken view of that reality is tied to a deformation of the comic in his eyes. Consequently, in one of Kierkegaard’s most direct affirmations of the thesis that the comic entails norms that are cognitive as well as existential, he says, “[L]aughter...requires a rational basis.”¹³⁵ While laughter can be an expression of our immediate state, it also implies a worldview and an understanding of what is normal, expected, appropriate, moral, etc.

¹³¹ *SKS* 8, 233 / *UDVS*, 134.

¹³² *SKS* 8, 233 / *UDVS*, 135.

¹³³ *SKS* 8, 300 / *UDVS*, 204. Here, Christ’s words from the Gospel of Matthew are cited and then associated with “the eternal requirement of earnestness” (*Ibid.*).

¹³⁴ *SKS* 8, 241 / *UDVS*, 144.

¹³⁵ *SKS* 8, 232 / *UDVS*, 133.

Our laughter reflects our perspective and worldview, and when that worldview faithfully presents the Christian worldview then Kierkegaard says it is legitimate. When it expresses a non-Christian worldview, thus endorsing norms that are contrary to reality, the comic is illegitimate. When, perhaps, the laughter is sheer ambiguous titillation, lacking a coherent self-understanding of what it is doing, it becomes “ludicrous”¹³⁶ and thereby sacrifices its legitimacy to ambiguity, which is even worse than to the clarity of error. For Kierkegaard, our perception of the comic reveals more of our worldview and more of our relation to God than many people realize.

The Corsair Affair: a Martyrdom of Laughter in the Name of the Comic

Just a few days after Kierkegaard had delivered the manuscript for *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* to printer Luno around Christmas 1845,¹³⁷ he entered into a public argument in Copenhagen that would become known as “The *Corsair* Affair.”¹³⁸ *The Corsair* was a satirical weekly newspaper in Denmark that was infamous for its skewering and ridiculing the objects of its derision. As its name and its emblem, a pirate ship, implies, *The Corsair* did not hesitate to be ruthless in its writing, which was often done under the safety of anonymity for its writers. Kierkegaard scorned *The Corsair*, saying that it is full of “the most diverse kinds of literary contemptibleness, whether brash lies, or mean persecution of someone who has been unsuccessful, or barefaced blasphemy of the good, or a besmirching meddling in the intimate lives of private

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ *Pap.* VII 1 B 71 / *COR*, 203-4.

¹³⁸ To be clear, there is no single work published by Kierkegaard under the name *The Corsair Affair*. Rather, the work under that name, here cited as “*COR*,” is a compilation of texts helpfully collected by the Hongs in order to facilitate reflection about this extended event in Kierkegaard’s life.

individuals, or mean and cowardly spite”¹³⁹ and that it “has sprung into existence out of filth.”¹⁴⁰ Kierkegaard also believed that *The Corsair* had the largest subscription of all the papers in Denmark, which aggravated its negative effect.¹⁴¹ This strong negative effect situated in such a comparatively small town as Copenhagen made Kierkegaard feel that *The Corsair* was not something that he could overlook.¹⁴²

From 1840-1846, a period called “*The Corsair*’s reign of terror,”¹⁴³ the paper was edited by Meir Goldschmidt (1819-1887), a man whose relationship with Kierkegaard was one of mutual admiration. For this reason, Kierkegaard believed that *The Corsair* was beneath Goldschmidt and would cause damage to him if he did not leave his position as editor of the trashy paper. Peder Ludvig Møller (1814-1865), on the other hand, was a man that Kierkegaard did not hold the same respect for. It has been argued, for example, that P. L. Møller was the model for Johannes the Seducer in Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*.¹⁴⁴ Møller developed a relationship with Goldschmidt in 1842, and the latter seems to have strongly come under Møller’s influence after that time, specifically in regards to matters concerning *The Corsair*.

¹³⁹ *Pap.* VII 1 B 55 / *COR*, 183.

¹⁴⁰ *Pap.* VII 1 B 40 / *COR*, 175.

¹⁴¹ “The fact that the only contemptible and the most widely circulated paper in Denmark is read by everyone...” (*Pap.* VII 1 B 55 238 / *COR*, 190). See also *Pap.* VII 1 B 37 208-9 / *COR*, 166-68; *COR*, 297n285.

¹⁴² “If the paper had a small circulation, then my judgment would be that it makes no difference whether it praised or abused...but the extensiveness of its circulation requires that the judgment be expressed differently” (*Pap.* VII 1 B 55 231 / *COR*, 183). See also *Pap.* VIII 1 B 72 260-61 / *COR*, 205.

¹⁴³ *COR*, ix.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xi.

In December of 1845, Møller published “A Visit in Sorø” in a yearbook entitled *Gæa*.¹⁴⁵ The piece includes a review of some of Kierkegaard’s work, focusing mostly on *Stages on Life’s Way*, which had been published in April of that year. While it has some seemingly complimentary things to say about Kierkegaard, including that *Prefaces* had some of the wittiest and most elegant polemics against Heiberg ever written,¹⁴⁶ it was also very cutting. Georg Brandes later criticized Møller’s piece for being “frivolous” and “dishonorable” for dealing in street gossip surrounding Kierkegaard, including implications that Kierkegaard had been performing some kind of torturous psychological experiment with his former betrothed, Regine.¹⁴⁷

Kierkegaard could not let this public slight go unanswered, so he responded by publishing a piece in *Fædrelandet* on December 27, entitled, “The Activity of a Traveling Esthetician and How He Still Happened to Pay for Dinner.”¹⁴⁸ This publication marks Kierkegaard’s entry into what would become known as the *Corsair* affair and would last a couple of years.¹⁴⁹ In it, Kierkegaard, under the pseudonym Frater Taciturnus, accuses Møller’s article of being “a confusion” that is full of many “factual untruths.”¹⁵⁰ He included a final sting in his publication for Møller, publicly exposing his intimate connection with *The Corsair*: “*ubi P. L. Møller, ibi The Corsair*.”¹⁵¹ Møller was an

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 96-104.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 99.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., xii-xiii.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 38-46.

¹⁴⁹ *The Corsair*’s last cartoon ridiculing Kierkegaard appeared on January 7, 1848, though its most intense focus against him only lasted six months (Ibid., 298n305).

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 39-40.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 46.

ambitious person, hoping to replace Adam Oehlenschläger as the University of Copenhagen's professor of esthetics. His affiliation with the low rag of *The Corsair* was a matter of public record, but it has been suggested that this revelation could have been damaging to his professional aspirations.¹⁵² It certainly seemed to cause enough anger in him to bring the fullness of *The Corsair*'s ridiculing firepower upon Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard also, in fact, asks to be publicly abused by the *Corsair*: "Would that I might only get into *The Corsair* soon. It is really hard for a poor author to be so singled out in Danish literature that he (assuming that we pseudonyms are one) is the only one who is not abused there."¹⁵³ He considered *The Corsair* to be so contemptible that it was an insult to be praised by it, as some of his pseudonyms had been earlier,¹⁵⁴ so Kierkegaard sought to rectify this by becoming vilified by the paper. He hoped that it would ruin *The Corsair* and its misuse of the comic for a "reputable" man to request comic abuse from the paper and to receive it.¹⁵⁵ Receive it he did. Some have suggested that Kierkegaard had been provoked by Møller and allowed himself to jump rashly into a public controversy, to painful results, but Kierkegaard insists that he had been thinking

¹⁵² Cf. Ibid., 143-45, 148. Garff calls Kierkegaard's move an "assassination" (Garff, 394). On the other hand, Robert Perkins argues that Møller was unlikely to have gotten his desired university post, even apart from Kierkegaard's sting (Robert L. Perkins, "Introduction," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Corsair Affair*, ed. Robert L. Perkins [Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1990], xvi-xix). Evans judges that Kierkegaard was "drawing public attention to a fact already widely known" (C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009], 8). Kierkegaard was perhaps, then, more widely announcing Møller's connection to *The Corsair*, but he was not delivering the initial revelation to the public.

¹⁵³ *COR*, 46.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 96. Cf. 141. Note that these compliments to Kierkegaard's writings and pseudonyms prior to the affair did nothing to ameliorate his opinion of *The Corsair*. He still expressed a preference to be abused rather than praised by the rag.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 46, 47-50.

about *The Corsair*'s problematic usage of the comic for a while and so deliberately engaged what he knew would be a messy and probably painful battle.¹⁵⁶

Goldschmidt

While Kierkegaard was contemptuous of P. L. Møller, unafraid of publicly exposing him, he exhibits the position presented in *Postscript* that matters of the comic need to be handled ethically by showing great care in how he dealt with the other major figure behind *The Corsair*, Meir Goldschmidt. Despite Kierkegaard's passion for ending the prurient and base comic deformation of *The Corsair*, he did not allow himself to become reckless and incautiously to take on collateral damage. While he thought it was too late for Møller, Kierkegaard maintained an interest in separating Goldschmidt from his own paper, even amidst the emotional intensity of a public squabble. Although Kierkegaard believed that Goldschmidt lacked "an idea," he saw that the editor was intelligent and talented, being "the only young man I actually have paid any attention to."¹⁵⁷ Kierkegaard was concerned that Goldschmidt would suffer due to his association with *The Corsair*,¹⁵⁸ so he decided willingly to "take the great risk of being abused and insulted by the rabble and misunderstood by the better class—simply to keep a human being from being destroyed."¹⁵⁹

Kierkegaard's concern that the comic be rightly handled is at the heart of his conflict with *The Corsair*, and the Hongs are right to point out his conflict with

¹⁵⁶ "For some time now, I have been aware of that paper and its insinuating misuse of the comic. It is not at all true that I got into all this by a rash step" (*Pap.* VII 1 B 55 / *COR*, 194).

¹⁵⁷ NB10:20 / *COR*, 232-34.

¹⁵⁸ NB:7 / *COR*, 210.

¹⁵⁹ *Pap.* VII 1 B 55 / *COR*, 182.

Goldschmidt on this same point.¹⁶⁰ Interestingly, as Goldschmidt reports in his autobiography, it was Kierkegaard who, after reading with some dissatisfaction *The Corsair*'s review of his dissertation on irony, suggested that Goldschmidt apply himself to comic writing. This suggestion was not well understood by Goldschmidt, who seems to think that Kierkegaard was urging him away from earnestness, while the reverse was the case:

[Kierkegaard] thought, however, that the article lacked composition and that I should apply myself to comic writing, that was my task. I took his words as good advice kindly meant, which they also undoubtedly were. Consequently, he also restricted me solely to the comic and denied me the capacity or the calling to manifest earnestness, respect, veneration. But what was the task assigned to me: comic writing? I could not very well ask him about that, and I did not know what it was. Once again I was at a loss.... After the bright flash he had tossed out, I stood in the dark.¹⁶¹

The Corsair was just over a year old at the time it reviewed Kierkegaard's dissertation, and Goldschmidt indicates that it was Kierkegaard's mysterious advice to engage in comic writing that spurred him on to take *The Corsair* in the aggressively satirical direction that it went. The irony of this situation was not lost on Goldschmidt: "There is something very curious about the fact that it was precisely [Kierkegaard] who should propose the paper or its presumed spirit as a law and goal for the paper. But it is also true that without any presentiment on his part or mine he on that day sharpened the tip that was later to stab him."¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ "The main point of contrast between Goldschmidt and Kierkegaard was the nature and the art of the comic" (Ibid., 298n311).

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 139. Later encounters with Kierkegaard did nothing to clarify for Goldschmidt his assigned task of doing comic writing: "During these meetings the question was always on the tip of my tongue: What is the task you have assigned me? What is comic writing? But neither did I have the right talents for raising the question, nor did his personality make such an approach easier" (Ibid., 141).

¹⁶² Ibid.

Kierkegaard came to recognize that Goldschmidt had misunderstood his task to engage in comic writing.¹⁶³ Concerned that *The Corsair* was using its so-called irony only to attack the Danish government, Kierkegaard had advised Goldschmidt to “attack everything equally.”¹⁶⁴ As Kierkegaard says, his word to Goldschmidt “was that it was nonsense to be ironical and also a party man who merely attacked the government; irony must make a clean sweep—the very point of which was to indicate to him how cowardly he was toward the public.”¹⁶⁵ It seems that Kierkegaard believed that there were significant cracks and gaps in Goldschmidt’s ironic incognito, exposing his whole attempt to engage in irony as nonsense. It was, instead, simple partisanship, attacking the government while leaving the public unscathed, and Kierkegaard saw in this Goldschmidt’s fear of the public. He wanted Goldschmidt to use his irony to critique the public as well (as Kierkegaard frequently did in his own writings) instead of giving them a pass.

But things did not go as hoped: “Then [Goldschmidt] once again took a totally wrong course, stooped to the most contemptible personal remarks, attacked private personalities, etc.—and he immortalized me.”¹⁶⁶ Goldschmidt appears to have interpreted Kierkegaard’s encouragement towards making a clean sweep and engaging in comic writing as encouraging him to throw off all restraints, letting the attacks descend to the most biting and personal level he could, refusing to spare even private citizens. Quite to the contrary, in Kierkegaard’s view one who engages in the task of an irony that makes

¹⁶³ NB3:20.b / *COR*, 224; NB10:20 / *COR*, 235.

¹⁶⁴ NB10:20 / *COR*, 233.

¹⁶⁵ NB3:20.b.a / *COR*, 224.

¹⁶⁶ NB10:20 / *COR*, 233.

a clean sweep must have strong ethical qualities that are an expression of his subjective maturity. He says that such a one must have “great personal courage,” be “very good-natured,” and have “a pure motive and heroic character.”¹⁶⁷ Notice that, against those who would think that having irony means being a scoundrel who takes nothing seriously, Kierkegaard believes the ironist must be a person of virtue, and, although his incognito prevents one from understanding him directly, the ironist must have a motive that is pure. Expressing doubt that *The Corsair* ever had a pure motive or idea, Kierkegaard says, “Whether *The Corsair* had ideas and, if so, the extent to which it had them depended upon and was proved by the extent to which it had sufficient dialectic to maintain and the personal courage to express absolute negativity. Goldschmidt had no inkling of this.”¹⁶⁸ The fact that *The Corsair* and Goldschmidt lacked an ideal conception for which they labored is evidenced by the fact that they lacked the subjective virtue of “personal courage,” which would be required to ironize impartially. Since Goldschmidt could not attack public and government equally, his incognito fell, and Kierkegaard saw this as a lack of courage on his part. It takes courage, discipline, rigor, and character to maintain an expression of absolute negativity, and this strength of expression cannot itself come from a negative place but can only be an indirect expression of one’s own positive earnestness. Perhaps unintuitively, having an ironic incognito is *evidence* that one holds an idea. That Goldschmidt lacked the incognito and its expression of absolute negativity was to Kierkegaard evidence that he failed to act out of subjective maturity in earnest

¹⁶⁷ NB3:20.b.a / *COR*, 224.

¹⁶⁸ NB10:20 / *COR*, 233. Here, when Kierkegaard speaks of irony’s expressing “absolute negativity,” he is indicating that it does not ironize selectively or show the obvious bias that he believed *The Corsair* had been doing heretofore.

service to an idea, not truly attacking the government out of a clear ideal conception of something to be gained but out of fear of the public. Had Goldschmidt had the personal courage and heroic character to ridicule the public as well, he would have proved that he was acting in earnest service to an idea—unpopularity be damned—rather than becoming an extension of public demoralization by playing the coward and ridiculing the safe thing.¹⁶⁹ Such is not an example of the comic carried out in integrity.

When Kierkegaard encouraged Goldschmidt to engage in comic writing, he wanted to provoke Goldschmidt to a more developed subjectivity, to have the courage to maintain an ironic incognito in service to an earnest commitment. He wanted Goldschmidt to gain an idea, just as Kierkegaard has when he uses the comic as negativity in service to the positivity of Christian religiousness.¹⁷⁰ As it was, though, Goldschmidt's activity was not true irony, and Kierkegaard had to "play the angry man" with him.¹⁷¹ His ethical motivations both for the right-handling of irony and for the well-being of the attempted ironist are evident in his decision to enter into the *Corsair* affair. Kierkegaard says, "[I]t was my intention to deliver a little judgment. To make men

¹⁶⁹ Kierkegaard does not understand Goldschmidt and his paper to be the ultimate source of his country's demoralization but evidence of it: "What brought in a new government was not wisdom, patriotism, and the like but an expression of this demoralization. And what will overthrow the new government will again be envy, caprice, pettiness, and the like; it is not the noble, the good, that triumphs—no, it is the same demoralization, which has given itself a new shape. In this respect, Goldschmidt is not undistinguished. He is like a cholera fly to cholera; it cannot be said that it is he who produces the demoralization (and everybody else is good) but that he makes manifest that there must be demoralization. He is and remains the characterless instrument of envy and demoralization. He has nothing to lose, cannot be attacked, or envied, either; he is safeguarded by means of contemptibility—and then he gnaws and gnaws.... How tragic that there is no character at all, no reflection, no consistent point of view anywhere in Denmark, but everything is momentary passion" (NB7:46 / *COR*, 228-29).

¹⁷⁰ "For I have considered negativity as the educational means toward the positive I wanted to advance: religiousness" (NB10:20 / *COR*, 233).

¹⁷¹ NB10:20 / *COR*, 235. In this passage, Kierkegaard indicates that his being perceived as a notable ironist was part of his decision not to be seen tacitly approving of Goldschmidt's practice of irony so-called.

aware of the abyss over which they had been hovering, I intended to show...how a thing like this ought to be done and also how dangerous it could be if actual persons were involved.”¹⁷² Kierkegaard’s public response via pseudonym had several motives, but one was to act as a model for Goldschmidt as to how comic judgment was to be rightly undertaken and to indicate, through the aesthetic device of the pseudonym, how “dangerous” it could be to people if it went wrong. The comic is a serious matter to him, and, though it can seem trivial, that only means that the comic poorly handled has the power to walk one out over an abyss, unawares. Goldschmidt was risking himself in a way that he did not perceive.

Higher Right

Goldschmidt, peculiarly, seemed to think that Kierkegaard might be pleased with his decision to subject Kierkegaard to public and trivial ridicule in *The Corsair*, as if the unrelenting nature of the attack were to be seen as a sign of strength or dedication. After Frater Taciturnus exposed Møller, Goldschmidt says, “Now I, too, of course, had to write on the affair.... What I wanted most of all at the moment was to show [Kierkegaard] that I had fulfilled the task he once had assigned to me: to do comic writing. In my opinion, even now, the task was successfully carried out....”¹⁷³ Even while *The Corsair* was publicly ridiculing Kierkegaard, for example, for treating life distantly as if it were a thought-experiment,¹⁷⁴ Goldschmidt’s attitude toward Kierkegaard was like that of a

¹⁷² NB10:20 / *COR*, 234.

¹⁷³ *COR*, 146-47.

¹⁷⁴ Frater Taciturnus is presented in *The Corsair* as having pompously plotted with the personification of *Fædrelandet* to end *The Corsair* once and for all. They are so pleased with their plan and their assumed victory that Frater Taciturnus celebrates, saying, “I shall do something for the poor. I shall imagine the thought-experiment that I have given a rix-dollar to a poor woman with five small

loyal student, hopefully seeking a kind word of approval from his teacher. His hope that Kierkegaard would approve of his comic writing, however, was to be disappointed:

[T]he next time I met Kierkegaard I asked him whether the article in *The Corsair* was comic writing. –He replied with a long, drawn-out No. –Why not? –Because the question cannot be put. In the first place, it lacks respect. –Respect for what? –For Frater Taciturnus’s higher right. –There again we stuck to our positions, and after a few words about other things we parted.¹⁷⁵

That Kierkegaard could disqualify Goldschmidt’s witty attacks from being true comic writing because they lack “respect” is indicative of the deeply ethical view of the comic that he has. Further, that they are so disqualified because they lack respect for the higher right of Frater Taciturnus indicates the importance of rightly handling the object of one’s comic lampoon. Although Taciturnus is merely a pseudonym, the point is made: actual

children. Imagine her joy! Imagine those innocent children seeing a rix-dollar!” (*COR*, 111-12). This cutting characterization of Kierkegaard as stingy, aristocratic, and disconnected from reality was one, Goldschmidt says, that matched an opinion of Kierkegaard that was sometimes expressed in Copenhagen at the time. Indeed, some scholars have a similar opinion of Kierkegaard today. It is interesting that one could think that “Kierkegaard did not stand in a genuine personal relation to his writings or to his life but carried on everything as a thought-experiment” (*Ibid.*, 147), especially given his unrelenting emphasis on the importance of human existence, his evident concern for his fellow inhabitants of Denmark, including those doing him great harm like Goldschmidt, and his critiques of Hegelianism for the same charge of rejecting existence in favor of abstraction. It is probably largely due to the (tragic?) effectiveness of his use of irony and humor to fashion an incognito that many could not or would not perceive much depth in him. Kierkegaard paid a real price for his engagement in indirect communication.

On the other hand, perhaps even this supposition gives too much credit to the public in Copenhagen. It may well be that Kierkegaard was criticized for living in abstract thought on the meager grounds that he was perceived to be smart and impenetrable, being “the author of Denmark’s thickest books” (*Ibid.*, 110). Note the observation of *The Corsair* in 1843 that many papers expressed repeated amazement at the thickness of *Either/Or*, adding, “A few of them did also review it, as if it were the thinnest book in the world—that is, as if they had been able to read it through in one day (it is 864 pages in two volumes). Almost immediately after its publication, they pronounced panegyrics upon it, they praised it as a marvel...” (*Ibid.*, 93). Kierkegaard did not believe himself to have had many true readers, if any at all, and I have no grounds to contradict his estimation.

It is worth noting that, years later, Goldschmidt himself expressed some doubt about the accuracy of the opinion that Kierkegaard related to life as if it were merely a thought-experiment: “Was it really so? The answer is not easy.... [T]here had come to be something about him that gave him the appearance of standing at a distance, observing ironically.... That could, in fact, be a pretense that would vanish if one followed him into his cubbyhole, but who could do that, and how much trouble do we take in that respect with regard to each other before it is too late? Egotistically preoccupied as we generally are, we accept the rumor floating in the air...” (*Ibid.*, 147-48).

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

persons are implicated in comic writing and must be dealt with in the proper way. Both men knew, as did many others in Copenhagen, that “Taciturnus” was a stand-in for Kierkegaard, so when Taciturnus is ridiculed, so is Kierkegaard. Also, when he speaks impersonally of Taciturnus’ higher right, Kierkegaard is indirectly claiming a higher right for himself in the affair.

What exactly does Kierkegaard mean by “higher right”? The phrase invokes Kierkegaard’s hierarchy of the stages of existence, where any attempt for the lower to ridicule the higher constitutes an illegitimate form of the comic. To put it another way, one must use the comic by drawing from norms that are ethically and religiously justified in subverting the object of the comic critique. If one is comically critiquing a less subjectively mature and less fully human mode of existence, then one has a “higher right” in invoking the comic judgment. Consider another conversation between Goldschmidt and Kierkegaard, where the former was annoyed at the latter’s exposure of Møller. While Goldschmidt could not bring himself to question Kierkegaard directly on this point, he was able to use the pseudonym to say that “Frater Taciturnus, however right he might be otherwise, on that point had done an injustice and inflicted an injury. To this, Kierkegaard replied that Frater Taciturnus’s right must be seen from a higher point of view. I said that I could not see his higher point of view, and then we talked for a moment about other things.”¹⁷⁶ One can see that the stages of existence are similarly invoked here since having a “higher right” is paired with having a “higher point of view.” That is, the “height” referred to is not the height of abstraction but existential height that tracks with ethical and religious advancement, and the “right” to use the comic in such a

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 146.

fashion is an ethical and religious right. The comic is an inescapably moral and, ultimately, religious phenomenon for Kierkegaard.

Notice, too, that Kierkegaard's position is not that the comic can never be used to ridicule anyone, only that its use must be morally justified and not done in a reckless fashion. Kierkegaard had no qualms about comically exposing and embarrassing P. L. Møller, even when Goldschmidt perceived the act to be injurious. Therefore, the comic is not rendered illegitimate simply because any person whatsoever, such as Goldschmidt, brings the charge against it. Everything depends upon its relation to the stages of existence, not the approbation of a public poll. Moreover, Kierkegaard's refusal to classify Goldschmidt's ridiculing as "comic writing" was not an expression of the dubiousness of using the comic polemically as such. Instead, Kierkegaard was expressing that he had a higher right in comically exposing the scurrilous Møller that Goldschmidt and *The Corsair* did not have in trying to ridicule Kierkegaard comically.

While in Goldschmidt's telling we do not see Kierkegaard spell out exactly what his full conception of this higher right must be, we do know that he was thoughtful and deliberate about how to use the comic to engage the affair. Kierkegaard's higher right in comically attacking Møller is not that he gets to rub an embarrassment in the face of one of his enemies (though that surely played a part in his motivation, and he might well have seen it as an act of justice).¹⁷⁷ Rather, since both remaining silent and using direct

¹⁷⁷ Kierkegaard tries to make clear that his article exposing Møller was not done impiously or in an act of rash passion. He does, though, concede his delight at what it meant for Møller: "The article against P. L. Møller was written in great fear and trembling; I did it during the holidays, but for the sake of a regulating resistance I did not neglect going to church or reading my sermon.... It was amusing and psychologically superb to see the haste with which P. L. Møller got the hint given about withdrawing into *The Corsair*. He came forward, bowed politely, and then withdrew to the place where he is at home" (NB:7 / COR, 209).

Incidentally, the fuller context of this passage further challenges Garff's account of events, presented above. Garff implies that Kierkegaard conjured up religious motives to cover the personal

engagement would not benefit anything, Kierkegaard saw his act as a way of indirectly destroying *The Corsair* and ridding Denmark of this plaguing rag: “Gradually it will be understood that when rabble-barbarism has achieved wide circulation and flourishes prosperously, it does no good to remain silent, but neither does it do any good to get into conflict with it; one must only help it to make itself even more lunatic and ask to be abused—then it will be exposed, and it will burst.”¹⁷⁸ Kierkegaard in fact wanted to *accentuate* the comic illegitimacy of *The Corsair*, hoping to make its low character evident to all, and he did this by volunteering himself, as a respected member of Denmark,¹⁷⁹ to be a target for its base and trivial attacks. Kierkegaard, then, was not just risking himself for Goldschmidt’s good but also for the good of all Denmark. Here is the nobility and self-sacrifice that Kierkegaard saw in his comic act. His “higher right” was not, say, in aggressively dominating an enemy through comic abuse but in offering himself up as a vulnerable target in order to expose the ludicrous nature of *The Corsair*.

animus that truly motivated him, saying, “This was Kierkegaard at his worst” (Garff, 394). In Kierkegaard’s telling, though, his religious confession is not meant to obscure his personal interest in the events since he confesses to both in the same passage.

¹⁷⁸ *Pap.* VII 1 B 70 / *COR*, 203.

¹⁷⁹ Kierkegaard knew well his elevated status in his native country and how he was perceived to be: “[T]hen let it be an ennobled person, an authoritative person, so that all will be built up when he chastises me” (*Pap.* VII 1 B 38 / *COR*, 175). Cf. NB5:88 / *COR*, 228. It is striking to see Kierkegaard refer to himself as “an authoritative person,” given his frequent claims to be writing as one who is “without authority.” While it is fair to charge Kierkegaard with pride from time to time, familiar as he was with his own extraordinary intelligence and insight, this passage is perhaps better understood as an expression of how he was viewed by others in Denmark rather than how he understood himself to be. Additionally, the public ridicule that Kierkegaard endured due to the *Corsair* affair was not a refutation of his high standing in Denmark but a confirmation of it. The comic abuse heaped upon him was hardly an earnest and substantive criticism. Rather, it was partly an expression of envy, with the public perversely delighting in the leveling of one who intimidated and confused them.

Aftermath

Kierkegaard's actions were costly to him, and not everything went as he had hoped.¹⁸⁰ He did, however, succeed in convincing Goldschmidt to abandon *The Corsair* in 1846,¹⁸¹ though the attacks on Kierkegaard continued for a couple of years without him. It seems that Goldschmidt never fully came to understand how the comic and the higher right—or, to put it another way, the jest and the earnestness—fit together in Kierkegaard's personality, though he recognized that both were present there: "In the bitterness of that glance, just as in Kierkegaard's entire personal appearance and manner, there was something that verged on the comic. But this vanished and gave place to the loftiness, the ideality that were also present in his personality."¹⁸² After he had wounded Kierkegaard in *The Corsair*, Goldschmidt began to feel guilty about his part in the affair, and the higher right that Kierkegaard had claimed appeared to be more obvious to him: "There was something about that intense, wild glance that drew the curtain, as it were, away from the higher right that Kierkegaard had asserted earlier and that I had not been able, rather, was unwilling to see, although I did indeed suspect it. It accused and depressed me: *The Corsair* had won the battle, but I myself had acquired a false no. 1."¹⁸³ In his harsh victory, Goldschmidt came to see that he had lost something more valuable,

¹⁸⁰ The context of public ridicule of Kierkegaard, often focusing on trivialities such as the appearance of his trousers, certainly did weigh on him after a while (E.g., NB5:61 / *COR*, 226-27). His social context changed for the worse, interfering with his modest delight in taking public walks: "In a way, I am living like a fish in water to which a disagreeable ingredient has been added, making it impossible for fish to breathe in it. My atmosphere has been tainted for me. Because of my melancholy and my enormous work, I needed a situation of solitude in the crowd in order to rest. So I despair. I can no longer find it" (NB2:55 / *COR*, 222).

¹⁸¹ *COR*, 149-50.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, 149.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*.

and Kierkegaard's willingness to be the one who was wounded was what clarified things for Goldschmidt, demonstrating that earnest matters were at stake after all beneath this seeming game of comic trivial fun.

Kierkegaard had predicted this sort of defeat-in-victory for Goldschmidt and *The Corsair*. During the affair, Kierkegaard had published a pseudonymous article in *Fædrelandet* in January of 1846 where he told the story of a tailor who foolishly prayed for the gods to grant him many customers so that he might become rich. Immediately, the tailor received a new order for many uniforms, which would undoubtedly bring such wealth, but, unfortunately for the tailor, the request was for *new* uniforms, while the tailor only knew how to mend old ones. Facing failure even amidst the granting of his wish, the tailor was led to bed and was never the same again. In this way, Kierkegaard says, "the gods punished him ironically by fulfilling his wish," and he likens this situation to one who "carries on the contemptible trade of vilification" while praying that his business would flourish.¹⁸⁴ Kierkegaard's warning to Goldschmidt and *The Corsair*, then, is not that the contemptible trade would fail but that the gods would mock it by granting it a success that is worse than failure. Goldschmidt felt the power of this situation with his false no. 1. This is just what Kierkegaard anticipated:

At the moment, it is true, it seems as if I had lost. But until now, this has been the rule for my victories: I always lose in the first lap, but I win in the end. This is rooted deeply in my nature, for I have no immediacy.... The crowd can always be assisted to victory but, please note, in such a way that it gains a wrong kind of victory. Goldschmidt's victory was complete: everybody laughed, all the thousands and thousands. And yet his victory will be costly to him; he has me stuck in his throat.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 48.

¹⁸⁵ NB5:88 / *COR*, 227-28.

With such a contemptible use of the comic, the “victory” of Goldschmidt and *The Corsair* is not a true victory but the sting of the gods’ ironic mockery. This is comic judgment that even takes a comic form.

Summary

Although Kierkegaard was given a “martyrdom of laughter,”¹⁸⁶ it was a martyrdom that he knowingly entered. Because Kierkegaard could say, “I have thereby done irreparable damage to myself”¹⁸⁷ in his handling of the *Corsair* affair, he knew that no one would be able to believe that he entered into these matters willingly. Even so, in his journals Kierkegaard insists that his entry into the affair was very deliberate and that he was quite aware that there would be painful consequences for him: “[E]ven if I were now to show how everything hangs together, what exceedingly rigorous ordering formed the basis, no one would believe it—for it would be inconceivable that anyone should have such a plan and keep quiet about it. Fools, only the person who can keep quiet has such a plan.”¹⁸⁸ Consequently, for one so devoted to and skilled in the comic as Kierkegaard, if he were to be martyred by the comic in order to expose *The Corsair*, it would have to be a martyrdom that he orchestrated by his own devices. Referring to Napoleon’s Marshal Ney, who gave the order to the firing squad for his own execution, Kierkegaard says,

¹⁸⁶ NB10:42 / *COR*, 236.

¹⁸⁷ NB:12 / *COR*, 215.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.* In this expression, Kierkegaard gives further insight to his understanding of the earnestness that will undergird a true comic incognito. The “silence” or impenetrability is not an admission of vacuity but, quite the opposite, of earnest commitment to a plan, to a way of being however much the public may rail against him. It was Goldschmidt’s inferior distortion of the ironic, lacking earnest inwardness, that could be so easily seen through.

“Quite rightly, I had to direct the laughter upon myself (as Ney directed the soldiers who shot him).”¹⁸⁹

Kierkegaard entered into his martyrdom of laughter not out of a strange masochism but out of a deep concern for the dangerous abuse of the comic that he perceived in *The Corsair*. For years Kierkegaard had thought and written about the ethical power of the comic and its essential role in subjective development, and he dreaded the effect that *The Corsair* would have on his beloved Denmark and on Goldschmidt, whom he respected despite his ties to the dishonorable rag. Kierkegaard writes:

Now my view (in line with my sense of the comic, of course) is that in a small country like Denmark a disproportionate and immoral phenomenon such as *The Corsair* does great harm and is of no benefit whatsoever, of no benefit because it counterfeits and taints the comic and thereby silences the authentic comic, just as a naughty child’s impertinence can cause the more sensible person not to come and visit or express himself in a family where such things go on, even if he otherwise loves the family very much, does great harm because it seduces the unstable, the irresponsible, the sensate, those who are lost in earthly passions, seduces them by means of ambiguity, lack of character, and the concealment of brash contempt under the pursuit of the comic.¹⁹⁰

Kierkegaard knew the power that the comic held, but when such power was wielded by a comic tainted by a lack of sufficiently earnest character, its ability to “seduce” became a real problem. This comic would have an ethically distorted effect on Denmark.

It troubled Kierkegaard that the popularity and success of *The Corsair* was in fact furthered because of its distortion of the comic: “You see, to my mind this paper does not have the true conception of the comic, but, on the other hand, it makes a lot of money

¹⁸⁹ NB10:42 / *COR*, 236.

¹⁹⁰ *Pap.* VII 1 B 55 / *COR*, 179-80.

with its warped conception of the comic....”¹⁹¹ When his works were complimented in *The Corsair*, then, Kierkegaard refused to lend his name in tacit approval to the paper’s activity, and he resolved to endure the pain of public ridicule in order to expose the paper’s own mockery of the comic, putting an end to its ethical demoralizations and serving Denmark’s subjective development. This was his higher right.¹⁹²

It seemed to many in Kierkegaard’s day—indeed, it may so seem to many of his readers today—that *The Corsair*’s distortion of the comic was really a thing of little importance, a trivial matter that Kierkegaard need not have concerned himself about. It is a testimony to Kierkegaard’s deep belief in the tie between jest and earnestness¹⁹³ that such a seemingly trivial matter as a misuse of the comic was one that he held with such seriousness and passion that he was willing to endanger his public esteem in order to be rid of it. Indeed, in Kierkegaard’s eyes, that *The Corsair* and its comic abuse was publicly regarded as being “nothing at all” made matters all the worse:

In the same vein, perhaps the most dangerous temptations are those that come under the modest label of “nothing at all.” The very fact that everybody says it is nothing at all may make it so harmful that the clergy could be better used here than to prepare a new hymnal, which everyone considers to be the demand of the times. The line of development proceeds from reflection through the comic to the religious; that is why the misuse of the comic spreads so rapidly in our day, while

¹⁹¹ *Pap. VII 1 B 55 / COR*, 181. As discussed above, though, Kierkegaard declared that its warped victories were just the gods’ way of ironically punishing it, so to speak.

¹⁹² In Chapter Four, I will discuss several Deconstructionist interpreters of Kierkegaard, who understand Kierkegaard’s humor and irony to be evidence of his playful lack of seriousness. This reading of Kierkegaard, however, cannot make sense of his earnest decision to expose *The Corsair*. Why else would Kierkegaard have exposed himself to public ridicule and disdain unless he saw the ethical and religious issues lying at the heart of things that he insisted on fighting for? If Kierkegaard were a thoroughgoing ironist, why would he have objected to *The Corsair* at all? If the comic were not a deeply earnest matter for Kierkegaard and if ironic laughter were everything for him, as some Deconstructionists suggest, then surely Kierkegaard would have been *The Corsair*’s biggest fan instead of its opponent. Kierkegaard’s engagement in the *Corsair* affair is an existential refutation of the Deconstructionist reading.

¹⁹³ *COR*, 178-79. Note that this passage seems to present Kierkegaard as repenting of this position. Reading a little further, though, one sees that he holds it as true, even if he is alone in doing so.

everybody believes it is nothing at all—although they still read it and subscribe to it and talk about it as about no other paper.¹⁹⁴

Because of the seemingly innocuous and trivial nature of the comic, its power is all the greater and its distortion is all the more pernicious. Its ethical power could operate stealthily unless one were to expose it dramatically. Further, religion itself is implicated in *The Corsair*'s comic distortion because of Kierkegaard's understanding of the comic's essential role in leading one to the religious. (The clergy could be of service on this issue, he says, if they were not already occupied with faddish demands such as the compilation of a new hymnal). The comic is not trivial at all, and the inconsistency between the public's evaluation of *The Corsair* and its obsession with the paper is evidence of the power that is truly there. To trivialize and downplay the comic, indeed, may be a means towards excusing one's own immoral indulgence in it.¹⁹⁵ Kierkegaard was at least able to bring Goldschmidt to see that the game he was playing was no game at all.

Both within the *Corsair* affair and elsewhere in his works, Kierkegaard's own employment of the comic is not an expression of vacuity or triviality but of his deep

¹⁹⁴ *Pap.* VII 1 B 55 / *COR*, 180-81.

¹⁹⁵ Similarly, Kierkegaard does not accept Schlegel's indications of the innocence of his controversial *Lucinde*, instead finding in its putative playfulness an earnest desire to undo ethics and redefine sexual mores. The novel's playfulness, Schlegel suggests, should be tolerated as one would tolerate a little child like his character Wilhelmine (Friedrich Schlegel, *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press], 52). Kierkegaard, though, says, "If it were possible to imagine *Lucinde* as a whole to be merely a caprice, a whimsical darling child of arbitrariness, kicking its legs like little Wilhelmine without a care for her dress or for what the world thinks...who, then, would be so laughable as not to want to laugh at it, who then, would be such a surly slug that he would not have the time of his life relishing it? But this is by no means the case. On the contrary, *Lucinde* has a highly doctrinaire character..." (*SKS* 1, 324 / *CI*, 289-290). Cf. George Pattison, "Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde*: A Case Study in the Relation of Religion to Romanticism," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38, no. 4 (1985): 558.

earnestness.¹⁹⁶ He loves the comic, which is why he is so dedicated to seeing it used rightly. Indiscriminate use of the comic without a consistent grounding in earnestness and guiding idea is a furtherance of societal demoralization, and the comic's formative power, whether for good or for ill, requires that Kierkegaard step in when he sees it distorted on such a grand scale. His dedication to the defense of the right use of the comic and the importance of its being rightly-grounded in ethical norms did not waver when *The Corsair's* pushback came against him.

During the *Corsair* affair, Kierkegaard published *Two Ages*, which includes a passage that can be read as an indirect commentary on the paper and its misunderstanding and distortion of the comic in which it claims to excel. Kierkegaard summarizes his position that explains his objection to *The Corsair*:

[A]nyone who understands the comic readily sees that the comic does not consist at all in what the present age imagines it does and that satire in our day, if it is to be at all beneficial and not cause irreparable harm, must have the resource of a consistent and well-grounded ethical view, a sacrificial unselfishness, a high-born nobility that renounce the moment; otherwise the medicine becomes infinitely and incomparably worse than the sickness.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ “And yet my ironic powers of observation and my soul derived such extraordinary satisfaction from gadding about on the streets and being a nobody in this way while thoughts and ideas were working within me, from being a loafer this way while I was clearly the most industrious of the younger set and appearing irresponsible this way and ‘lacking in earnestness’ while the earnestness of the others could easily become a jest alongside my inner concerns” (NB:15 / *COR*, 217).

¹⁹⁷ *SKS* 8, 71-72 / *TA*, 74.

PART II. KIERKEGAAARD'S COMIC LEGACY

CHAPTER FOUR

Irony and Deconstructionist Readings of Kierkegaard

As we have seen, the comic, and its existential correlates humor and irony, are not ancillary notes in Kierkegaard's authorship but concepts that are fundamental to his project, directly tied to such issues such as subjectivity, advancement through the stages of existence, the inadequacy of objective philosophy for human existence, and even ethical and religious living. For the last few decades, there has been a trend in Kierkegaard studies that also attempts to be aware of the comic in Kierkegaard's writings, especially irony, and this trend should be considered here in order to distinguish it from the concerns and methods of this project.

Kierkegaard's favor has risen and fallen rather dramatically in philosophical and theological circles since his death in the middle 19th century. For example, after Kierkegaard gained an unfortunate association with post-World War II existentialism, his star rose and subsequently plummeted with the estimation of the existentialist project. Currently, there is renewed interest in Kierkegaard again in various academic circles and for various and often contrary reasons. Of the several reasons that could be given for this renewed interest,¹ one important one is the uncanny suitability of Kierkegaard's thought

¹ Ferreira emphasizes three reasons for the Kierkegaard renaissance: 1) the completion in 2000 of the English edition of Kierkegaard's writings by Howard and Edna Hong through Princeton University Press, which has contributed greatly to Kierkegaard's accessibility, 2) renewed attention to the original Danish manuscripts, most notably by the Søren Kierkegaard Research Center in Copenhagen, which, since 1994, has been producing what promises to be the most scholarly and authoritative edition of Kierkegaard's works in Danish ever produced, and 3) the recent addition of literary interest in Kierkegaard's writings to the already existing field of philosophical and theological interest in him (M. Jamie Ferreira, *Kierkegaard* [Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009], 8-13).

to postmodern concerns and methods. “Postmodernism” is a notoriously broad word, which will not be precisely and finally defined here. Within postmodern scholarship of Kierkegaard, there is a trend that I will refer to as the “deconstructionist” trend of reading Kierkegaard, which takes postmodernism’s more general distrust and critique of modernism’s assumptions, such as the ability of linguistic structures to contain or capture meaning, and extends it radically.² Just as Deconstruction began with Jacques Derrida in the late 1960’s, so do these deconstructionist readers of Kierkegaard tend to look to the writings of Derrida and others sympathetic to his project as lenses through which to interpret Kierkegaard. Indeed, they consider Kierkegaard to be so amenable to their project that many consider Kierkegaard to be a kind of proto-deconstructionist, forging the way for the thought that would eventually come to claim his banner in the late 20th century. These deconstructionist readers tend to find in Kierkegaard a skepticism or even despair about the ability of language to convey much of significance about the human condition and selfhood, and this can lead to doubt about the existence of many traditional conceptions, such as whether there is a God apart from our psychological projections or whether such a thing as the “self” even exists or is comprehensible to discuss. Consequently, when they read Kierkegaard’s frequently lengthy and complicated works, they often conclude that he is merely speaking playful nonsense, engaging in language games to show the futility of traditional sources of meaning and clarity in the West such as philosophy and the Christian religion. Kierkegaard’s apparently earnest statements about the importance of developing subjective maturity, traditional Christian doctrines, or

² Deconstruction is rightly associated with postmodernism, but one should be careful not to conflate the two categories. For example, Merold Westphal is a philosopher who is interested in Kierkegaard’s relevance for postmodern thought, but it would be a mistake to associate Westphal with the deconstructionist readers of Kierkegaard that I address.

important ethical matters, then, are taken to be examples of extreme irony from a master ironist. To take Kierkegaard seriously at these points, they think, is to misread him naïvely and to take insufficient account of his ironic attitude that playfully exhibits his literary virtuosity. To read Kierkegaard as if he had much content or advice to offer his readers is, they think, to be tone-deaf and rather unsubtle. These readings, then, are often marked by qualities of playfulness, irony, word games and punning, free association (often with non-traditional sources of authority or scholarship), and sexual imagery.

Restraints of space prevent a comprehensive overview of this contemporary tradition of reading Kierkegaard deconstructively, but I will briefly consider four representative figures of it: Louis Mackey, Roger Poole, Elsebet Jegstrup, and Mark C. Taylor. While these scholars do not read Kierkegaard identically, there are enough similarities among them to be profitably considered together. Of particular relevance to my argument is how their understanding (or misunderstanding) of irony influences them towards inadequate readings of Kierkegaard.

Louis Mackey

Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet

It has been charged that especially prior to the 1970's Kierkegaard scholarship had paid insufficient attention to the literary practices and skill that Kierkegaard uses in his writings. For example, Walter Lowrie and Niels Thulstrup, two scholars who were influential on how Kierkegaard was received in theological and philosophical circles, have been accused of being inattentive to the irony and humor in Kierkegaard's works and of downplaying the role of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms by taking Kierkegaard's

statements as too directly representing his own thought even when they had been published under the name of one of his pseudonyms.³ Louis Mackey agreed that Kierkegaard's artistry was insufficiently appreciated or respected in scholarly analysis,⁴ so in 1971 he published *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet*, where he argued that, before he was a philosopher or theologian, Kierkegaard was foremost a poet⁵ and desired to be read in that way.⁶

This early Mackey does not seem so revolutionary in the current context of Kierkegaard studies, and this is to be taken as a credit to Mackey who helped to push the guild into a stronger appreciation of Kierkegaard's aesthetics, even if it does not always follow his readings on other points. Mackey was the first to influence Kierkegaard scholarship to "the possibility of reading Kierkegaard from a rhetorical point of view prior to a theological or hermeneutical perspective."⁷ This early Mackey desires to foreground a poetic and literary reading of Kierkegaard, not to eliminate his philosophical and theological interests entirely. He does, though, object to seeing aesthetics as a vehicle for philosophical content: "[T]he literary techniques of

³ C. Stephen Evans, though sympathetic to many points in Lowrie's and Thulstrup's analyses, concedes that there is some validity to the charge that these figures ignore the pseudonymous character of some of the texts they examine (Evans [2006], 70) and that they sometimes insufficiently acknowledge the irony present (Ibid., 78).

⁴ Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), xi-xii.

⁵ "But the fact is that if Kierkegaard is to be understood *as Kierkegaard*, he must be studied not merely or principally with the instruments of philosophic and theological analysis, but also and chiefly with the tools of literary criticism" (Ibid., x).

⁶ "I have tried to read the works he wanted read in the way he wanted them read" (Ibid., xi).

⁷ Kevin Newmark, "Taking Kierkegaard Apart," in Sylviane Agacinski, *Aparté: Conceptions and Deaths of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed., Mark C. Taylor, trans., Kevin Newmark (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1988), 6.

Kierkegaard cannot be interpreted as devices for the expression of a content independently intelligible.... In a word, Kierkegaard is not a philosopher and theologian who puts up poetic advertisements to recommend his product. More Dante than Thomas Aquinas, he is a poet whose orientation is primarily philosophical and theological.”⁸

At times, though, even this early Mackey sounds as if he would like to go farther than his thesis actually argues. Despite claiming that Kierkegaard is a poet who maintains a philosophical and theological orientation, he also calls Kierkegaard “perhaps the most extreme antiphilosopher of modern times”⁹ and argues that any philosophical and theological propositions found in Kierkegaard should be read as articulations of form.¹⁰ He says that any unity found in Kierkegaard’s corpus is only metaphoric and suggests that his dialectic is one of images rather than concepts (as if metaphors and images had no conceptual content).¹¹ Kierkegaard, Mackey says, turns philosophy into poetry, reclaiming its poetic destiny: “His own writings offer not ideas about the thing—certainly not clear and distinct ideas—but, through the resplendence of images and the refractions of indirect communication, a way to the thing itself.”¹² Mackey says that it is necessary to take Johannes Climacus at his word “when he says he has no opinions and proposes no doctrines.”¹³ Therefore, he says that when *Concluding Unscientific*

⁸ Mackey (1971), 259.

⁹ Ibid., 268.

¹⁰ Ibid., 259.

¹¹ Ibid., xii, 258-60.

¹² Ibid., 269.

¹³ Ibid., 137.

Postscript is read “as a philosophical treatise it is nonsense,”¹⁴ and he broadens his conclusion to include Kierkegaard’s corpus: “Taken as instruments of his intent, his works add up to magnificent nonsense. But the truth is that Kierkegaard the poet of inwardness did not ‘really mean’ anything. His ‘intent’ is to exfoliate existential possibilities, not to offer a systematic appraisal of reality as seen from his point of view; like all poets he is concerned not with mentioning but with making.”¹⁵

One sees that Mackey’s understanding of Kierkegaard as a poet offering no philosophical content links up to his description of the literary elements of parody, irony, humor, satire, etc. He wants to find in such elements nothing but the unbridled play of a poetically exuberant author, no indication of his own evaluations about what is right or wrong with the world and no implications for how problematic realities might be ameliorated. Mackey says of Kierkegaard, “His philosophical essays, like well-turned jokes, are to be taken quite seriously; but it is not to be supposed that they represent the personal commitments of the jokester, or that they spring from a speculative *Weltanschauung*.”¹⁶ Mackey wants to argue that Kierkegaard’s philosophy, like jokes, do not spring from the worldview or personal commitments of the one offering them, but we have seen that both Kierkegaard’s philosophy and his comic forms originate from and

¹⁴ Ibid., 192.

¹⁵ Ibid., 290.

¹⁶ Ibid., 137. Mackey does not always maintain consistency in his arguments, which can lead to some puzzlement for the reader. For example, soon after making this claim that jokes and humor do not imply cognitive content or personal commitments, he goes on to argue, “More than once Kierkegaard makes sport of the Hegelian claim that philosophy ‘begins with nothing’” and proceeds to illustrate it with Kierkegaard’s imagined scene of Socrates ridiculing Hegel and his philosophy in the underworld (Ibid., 138-39). How can Kierkegaard’s humorously making sport of and ridiculing a Hegelian proposition through Socrates—which Mackey himself concedes—not imply something about Kierkegaard’s own contrary philosophical beliefs and worldview? This sounds suspiciously as if Kierkegaard were a philosopher who is conveying some of his ideas through an artistic medium, not a poet whose intent is irrecoverable and whose resplendence of images hold no opinions and offer no appraisal of reality.

imply his earnest commitments and polemical agendas. Mackey believes that he has saved Kierkegaard's "philosophy" from content by likening it to the frivolous literary arena of humor, but he shows only that he misunderstands both elements. Kierkegaard does indeed associate philosophy with humor and other comic forms, but this is not, as Mackey would have it, because philosophy has the same groundless and empty fun of humor but rather because humor has the same normative content and worldview implications as philosophy. Even if one had not studied Kierkegaard's views of the comic to any great extent, it should at least be apparent that Kierkegaard could believe irony and humor to have some relation to one's personal commitments, worldview, and existence since he locates both at key points in his stages of existence, each of which imply their own commitments, worldview, and existence.

It is as if Mackey believes that irony and humor can have no implications for one's commitments since they are under his classification of "the aesthetic."¹⁷ Even if it is conceded that irony and humor "are modes of communication secretively arch rather than conventionally sincere,"¹⁸ their functioning as incognitos and as forms of indirect communication does not imply that there is necessarily no sincerity or belief of any kind involved. The ironist and the humorist are not to be simply equated with nihilists, for example. Aesthetic relevance does not entail philosophical vacuity. Nevertheless, Mackey will say, for example, that the pattern he believes to be representative of parody, irony, and humor "is visible in the superficially argumentative but fundamentally satiric

¹⁷ "[T]hey are aesthetic in the sense of uncommitted" (Ibid., 279-80). Not everything that Mackey says here is mistaken, but it is not always a simple matter to separate the helpful from the poor.

¹⁸ Ibid., 280.

texture of *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.”¹⁹ Why would Mackey distinguish between argumentative and satiric descriptions of these texts? This suggests that *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* are not making arguments but that they only seem to be doing so while, in fact, being fundamentally satiric works. But does this contrast not set up a false dilemma? Why cannot an argument be a satiric argument? By definition, must not a satire imply some kind of argument or critique? What would it mean to have a satire that does not hold a position for which it implicitly argues? It is as if Mackey thinks that a form of the comic, satire no less, is by nature antithetical to argument. Since he finds satire present, any apparent argument must therefore only be superficial and illusory.

Kierkegaard, though, does not contend that earnestness is excluded by the presence of the comic: “But the presence of irony does not necessarily mean that the earnestness is excluded. Only assistant professors assume that.”²⁰ Sometimes Mackey seems close to grasping this point, but then he falls away from it. For example, he quotes this very passage and follows it by saying, “The *Philosophical Fragments* is irony *and* earnest, unmediated. The self-contradiction in the title should have warned even a German theologian that this was to be a *paradoxical* book about the Absolute Paradox!”²¹ He is quite right to say that *Philosophical Fragments* is irony and earnestness unmediated, but he does not seem to understand that the irony itself comes from a place of earnestness and so functions as an incognito of the earnestness that is its source.

¹⁹ Ibid., 283-84.

²⁰ *SKS* 7, 253.1 / *CUP* 1, 277n.

²¹ Mackey (1971), 167-68.

Earnestness is not excluded from being behind irony itself. Rather, for Mackey it is as if irony and earnestness were opposites and as if Kierkegaard placed them together in *Philosophical Fragments* in order to create a paradoxical work of nonsense that defies human understanding or reception of any philosophical content. Mackey defines paradox as something that breaks against the human imagination,²² so *Philosophical Fragments* is incomprehensible to the human mind because it speaks of irony and earnestness together, which is as nonsensical as speaking of a square circle. Mackey is defining irony against earnestness. Where one is, the other must be excluded. So, by putting both together, one has a work that, when read as a philosophical treatise, is nonsense.

One sees how integral Mackey's misreading of irony is to his misreading of Kierkegaard as a whole. If irony and other forms of the comic are to be taken as exclusionary to earnestness, then by locating irony within Kierkegaard's writings one must conclude that they cannot be earnest works. Therefore, any appearance that they have of making an earnest argument must be an illusion. Therefore, Kierkegaard must not be doing philosophy at all. He must be a kind of poet. Hence, it is thought to be important to emphasize the aesthetic and literary dimension to Kierkegaard's writings before one risks being so thick-headed as to speak of any conceptual content within his "obvious"²³ poetics.

Kierkegaard and Shakespeare. Since Kierkegaard is taken to be a kind of poet, Mackey says, "To write a compendium of Kierkegaard's doctrines by means of a review of his works is like summarizing the philosophy of Shakespeare by means of a survey of

²² Ibid., 260.

²³ Ibid., ix.

the plays,”²⁴ adding that to assume that Kierkegaard’s writings hold some doctrinal statement or argument that could be accepted or rejected “makes about as much sense as agreeing or disagreeing with *Hamlet*.”²⁵ Kierkegaard is compared to Shakespeare in that both are poet-artists for whom examining their works for a deeper philosophy or message would be senseless. It is interesting that Mackey should choose this comparison since Kierkegaard himself had quite a bit to say about Shakespeare. In fact, at the end of his dissertation, Kierkegaard briefly discusses Shakespeare in the context as a poetic master who uses irony. After calling Shakespeare the grand master of irony, Kierkegaard says, “But by no means does Shakespeare allow the substantive worth to evaporate into an ever more fugitive sublimate, and as for the occasional culmination of his lyrics in madness, there is an extraordinary degree of objectivity in this madness. When Shakespeare is related ironically to what he writes, it is precisely in order to let the objective dominate.”²⁶ Kierkegaard had no qualms about speaking of objective content in literature—indeed, even in literature where irony is “everywhere present.”²⁷ Shakespeare is highly praised for this ability that refuses to let a kind of unmastered irony run away with it all. Further, even if Mackey is antagonistic towards investigating the intent or the life-view of poets such as Kierkegaard and Shakespeare through their poetic creations,

²⁴ Ibid., ix.

²⁵ Ibid., x. Mackey has a point in that Kierkegaard would very likely have rejected an attempt to create a purely objective and systematic compendium or philosophical system out of his thought, but this is a separate matter from declaring that there is no content whatsoever in Kierkegaard that one could find either to agree or to disagree with. There is more to philosophy than objective systems alone—indeed, there are philosophical fragments!—and it is a mistake for Mackey to suggest that if an objective philosophical system is to be avoided then a work of poetry that lacks all philosophical content is the only recourse.

²⁶ SKS 1, 352-53 / CI, 324.

²⁷ SKS 1, 353 / CI, 324.

Kierkegaard himself is not. He came to very decisive conclusions about who the German Romantics were and what they were up to philosophically by reading their writings, including aesthetic works such as Schlegel's *Lucinde*. Moreover, following the discussion of Shakespeare, Kierkegaard shows that he believes it is legitimate to consider even "the poet's personal life" and so to draw conclusions about the degree to which his mastery over irony in his work does or does not exist in congruency with his own life.²⁸

New Criticism as a prologue to Deconstruction. One must wonder, is it really as ridiculous as Mackey suggests for one to disagree with ideas presented in a play, such as its conceptions of human nature and free will, its vision of the universe and the consequences of one's actions, and its implied moral standard? Is art truly some content-free and intent-free zone? Kierkegaard did not endorse such a position, and he had no difficulty in lamenting dreadful comedies that he considered to encourage the demoralization of his age.²⁹ Such plays have a worldview that Kierkegaard finds both contrary to the true nature of things and harmful for those who fall for its pernicious persuasion. These plays have a *message* that is, to his regret, consonant with the worldview of many of the audience members: "Done for, they say, we are all done for; nobody should complain about anybody—let's all laugh! The crazier the better, they say."³⁰ Against Kierkegaard's view, Mackey gives the following theory of poetic creations:

²⁸ *SKS* 1, 353-54 / *CI*, 324-26.

²⁹ E.g., NB10:70 / *JP* 2, 1761; NB14:126 / *JP* 2, 1763.

³⁰ NB10:70 / *JP* 2, 1761.

What the poet produces is a verbal object (*poiema*) in which meanings, released from any personal interest he may vest in them, are neither affirmed nor denied, but simply placed. A poem in this sense does not *mean*—it does not urge the feelings and opinions of the poet on the reader. It *is*—as a thing made it is self-sufficient (*perfectum*) and bears no message not indigenous to its perfection.³¹

Kierkegaard would not be sympathetic to the divorcing of art from subjectivity any more than he was sympathetic with divorcing philosophy from subjectivity.³² Mackey's theory suggests the famous final lines of Archibald MacLeish's poem "Ars Poetica": "A poem should not mean / But be."³³ However, one must ask: cannot being also mean or signify?

³¹ Mackey (1971), 285.

³² The quest for a "verbal object" that is distinct from its poet-creator parallels the philosopher's quest for a system of reason that downplays or eliminates the stamp that indicates its origin in an existing human being situated in a particular context. The goal of objectifying, whether art or philosophy, is inhuman in its aims and must therefore be inconsistent in its methods since it is performed by a human. Neither a human being nor his philosophic system nor his poems are "self-sufficient" or autonomous.

On this point, I add the observation that if Mackey's theory were to be taken seriously it would, quite apart from his intention, be the undoing of irony. Mackey wants the poet to release all personal interest in his work and describes a poem as a self-sufficient thing that "bears no message not indigenous to its perfection," but irony demands a subjective tie. It must bear a message other than the one it seems to in its indigenous words, otherwise there is no ironic misrelation between inner and outer, and the poem is reduced to an objective statement. Since irony is a misrelation between the inner and the outer, though, both inner and outer are required for irony to be present. To eliminate the misrelation by attempting not to consider the poet himself in relation to his poem is necessarily to eliminate the irony. One cannot objectively consider irony, which is exactly why Kierkegaard found it useful, since it cannot then simply be absorbed into the objective system. Irony implies an existing human being because it is a way of existing. Irony, then, is not a mere "literary device" that can be abstracted into a poetic object and rightly understood apart from all personal interest. If Kierkegaard had wanted to objectify his works, as Mackey suggests, he would not have worked so hard to give his pseudonyms such vivid personalities, which are worked through the presentation of the texts.

³³ I confess that I have long been puzzled by MacLeish's dictum and its endorsement by the New Critics because it strikes me as so evidently self-contradictory. It expresses an opinion that, in Mackey's words, a poem "does not urge the feelings and opinions of the poet on the reader" and resists the urge for one to search for a meaning behind the text rather than being content with the being of the text itself. One need not look for a "moral" hidden in every poem. Oddly, though, there *is* an opinion or lesson being urged upon the reader by MacLeish's poem, and it is precisely this: "A poem should not mean / But be." MacLeish is giving instruction, in poetic form, about how one should craft and read poetry. Notice his choice of the modal word "should." In fact, "Ars Poetica" is chock-full of the word "should," and its very title suggests that this poem is instruction in the art of poetry. In my opinion, "Ars Poetica" is, in fact, a particularly clear example of a poem that does indeed "mean" something and is not content with merely "being." The famous ending "A poem should not mean / But be" also means something, and it is precisely because its message was found to be so palatable to literary critics that it has become such a familiar phrase. If the line did not mean something, then how could it serve as a capsule of the philosophy of a literary movement? Since it does mean, though, it proves itself false!

The poem's ending was taken up as a kind of motto by the New Critics, and its invocation indicates Mackey's indebtedness to New Criticism in this work. Aside from MacLeish's lines, Mackey

If not, then it is difficult to see how, to continue the Shakespeare example, one can speak of genres of plays, such as “tragedy.” Can something be tragic to an author or to an audience unless they ascribe value and meaning to certain things, such as human life, political harmony, and justice to all concerned? Surely a human must be invested with moral commitments in order to feel any of the pain that makes something recognizably tragic.

Mackey seeks support for his theory of a poem’s distance from the poet’s intent and worldview by citing one of Kierkegaard’s journal entries, where he describes God as a poet.³⁴ Kierkegaard says that his analogy explains why God puts up with so much evil and nonsense since a poet also allows his production to come forth, and it is just as big of a mistake to assume that everything that happens gets God’s stamp of approval as it would be to assume that everything that individuals in a poem say or do are expressions of the poet’s personal opinions. This is a fair point. Unfortunately for Mackey’s argument, though, in the rest of the journal entry Kierkegaard does not take this to the conclusion that a poem is released from all intent and opinions of the poet and stands alone as self-sufficient, as if creation could shrug off God’s evaluation of their lives as irrelevant to their being. Kierkegaard continues,

Oh no, [God] has his own opinion. But poetically he allows everything possible to happen, he himself is present everywhere, looks on, continues to create poetically, in a sense impersonally, at the same time observant of everything, in

also indicates the influence of New Criticism by referencing another famous New Criticism dictum, “the heresy of paraphrase” (Mackey [1971], 291), and by showing his resistance to letting a search for Kierkegaard’s intent guide the meaning of his writings (though Mackey might be inconsistent on the latter point, given the freedom with which he speaks about reading Kierkegaard as he wanted to be read).

³⁴ Ibid., 270.

another sense personally, marking the most terrible difference, the difference between good and evil, between wishing as he desires, and not as he wills, etc.³⁵

The poem of creation has meaning, even though not everything that happens can be taken as a simple and direct expression of the divine poet's subjectivity. But the poet is present, nevertheless, even if only indirectly. He has his opinions, is making his moral distinctions, and eventually will issue a final judgment about the meaning of it all. Kierkegaard's God is no disinterested Aristotelian or Deistic God, who does his work and then turns away to go on about other business, leaving creation to its own devices and conclusions. Neither does a poem exist in self-sufficient isolation from a subjective poet.³⁶ The great Irony of God is that what the text of creation seems to be saying *prima facie* may not in fact be what the true meaning of life is. Our reading may be misled by a vast incognito, with the final explication of the poem yet to come.

On the other hand, while *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* is occasionally marked by peculiar arguments, including arguments concerning irony and humor,³⁷ it not

³⁵ Alexander Dru, ed. and trans. *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 1377. Here, I cite the Dru translation that Mackey uses. Cf. NB33:24 / JP 2, 1445.

³⁶ This is why, to gain literary distance from his creations, Kierkegaard could not just declare some form of proto-New Criticism doctrine, setting the literary work to be itself objectively. A poem is always the product of a poet. Thus, in order to put distance between it and himself, he had to generate a *new* poet, so to speak. He makes pseudonyms, sometimes nesting pseudonyms within pseudonyms, with the idea that, in light of such a vivid pseudonymous character, Kierkegaard himself might disappear from the attention of the reader. If all poetry could be cleanly and utterly divorced from the poet, his pseudonyms would not be necessary.

³⁷ For example, Mackey argues that, in contrast to irony, humor is affirmative in its attitude toward its object (Mackey [1971], 280). Oddly, he tries to support his case by citing *SKS* 7, 256-57 / *CUP* 1, 281-82. While it is true that the manner of the comic is described as careful and not reckless, it is still hardly "affirmative" in relation to its object. The comic is here described as a scythe that cuts down and lays aside immediacy. This is necessarily polemical and not affirming, even if it so acts in a kind or gentle manner.

infrequently comes close to true and helpful insight into Kierkegaard.³⁸ For example, Mackey notes that the humorist's role of awakening people to their own existence is an activity done "almost in earnest."³⁹ If he had trusted his instincts at this point Mackey may have been led to question his thesis and to see the philosophical and theological issues at stake for Kierkegaard even in the supposedly literary elements of irony and humor. As it is, though, Mackey went in the other direction. His position in *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* is not yet deconstructive, though it would eventually lead there.

Certain literary movements, like New Criticism, which put a great deal of confidence in the independent powers of language to communicate naturally lead into postmodern movements like Deconstruction. This is because the great faith put in the structures of language is found to fail and sometimes directly oppose their purpose. Notice Mackey's confidence: "The speech of a poet, on the other hand, does not utter his inner states, but rather builds meanings into a free standing structure of language."⁴⁰ When those free standing structures are found to totter and crumble, however, the failure of language to stand objectively and self-sufficiently becomes the grist for the new mill

³⁸ Mackey is correct when he says that a Kierkegaardian pseudonym is a *persona* for artistic purposes not a *nom de plume* to hide his personal identity (Mackey [1971], 247), but why deny the author himself any position in relation to these *persona* and why rule out the possibility that Kierkegaard is using these *persona* to his own ends?

Again, Mackey's point that every philosophical standpoint is perspectival and not objective or neutral (Ibid., 266) is welcome, correct, and in accord with Kierkegaard's project. Why, though, use this to downplay the presence of philosophical or theological content, opinions, or doctrine in Kierkegaard's works? If Kierkegaard truly gave us no opinions or arguments, one wonders why anyone would read Kierkegaard at all, except perhaps as some mild diversion.

³⁹ Ibid., 194.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 284.

of reflecting on how language fails to contain the meaning that many once thought it did.⁴¹

The Reborn Deconstructionist

It is unsurprising, then, that after publishing a few more articles Mackey fell silent for about a decade and then returned, evidencing his conversion to deconstruction.⁴²

While irony was important to his readings before, interested as they were in literary marks, with *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard* (1986) Mackey's taste for irony returns with a vengeance and power that is so often seen among Deconstructionists. As Mark C. Taylor says, "Like Kierkegaard, Mackey begins with irony."⁴³ This is true to such an extent that he asks whether we can trust Mackey's preface⁴⁴ and describes Mackey as approaching Kierkegaard's writings with such skepticism-riddled questions as, "Are books and/or texts meaningful? Can writings speak? Do texts communicate?"⁴⁵

Mackey had become much harder in his attack on philosophical and theological readings of Kierkegaard, and, while in 1971 he was willing to concede that Kierkegaard was a poet like Dante whose orientation could drift to the philosophical or theological,

⁴¹ This parallels how Enlightenment faith in the universality, objectivity, and saving power of reason naturally crumbles into postmodern skepticism and mistrust of hidden agendas and power structures. Former faith in a having a system of knowledge results in much contemporary suspicion about any project that claims to be systemic or totalistic. Having too much faith in an unworthy thing leads inexorably to despair and cynicism. As Henri de Lubac says, "Nothing, thus, is more dangerous than a poorly founded optimism: only despair can come from it" (Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983], 451).

⁴² Roger Poole, "The unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth-century receptions" in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 67; Mark C. Taylor, "Foreword" in Louis Mackey, *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), x.

⁴³ Mark C. Taylor (1986), xi.

⁴⁴ Ibid., xii.

⁴⁵ Ibid., xiv.

now he says pointedly, “Irreconcilably antiphilosophical, Kierkegaard is thereby also—necessarily and in principle—set against theology.”⁴⁶ His position on irony became more absolute and antagonistic as well. For Mackey, irony in Kierkegaard is “indefeasible,”⁴⁷ “perfectly suspensive,”⁴⁸ “the endlessly iterated origin from which necessarily nothing can originate,”⁴⁹ and “the *no* to everything that exists.”⁵⁰ This is an irony, he believes, that lacks all earnestness.

Consequently, Mackey’s writing, like the writing of many deconstructionists, is marked by what he takes to be the irreverent irony of frequent clever wordplay. For instance, in a particularly garish example, Mackey discusses the irreconcilable diversity of “s/Spirit(s).”⁵¹ Elsewhere, while considering the farce of life, he writes, “A whore-text? Maybe a pretext....”⁵² This wordplay alludes to Derridean ideas, such as the *hors-texte*⁵³ and his idea that every text is a pretext. The use of “whore” has the advantage of alluding to deconstructionist thought while also using a sexual image that is probably

⁴⁶ Louis Mackey, *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), xxi. See also xviii.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, xx.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xxii.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, xx. This is probably intended to allude to the Hegelian Absolute Spirit while also indicating individual spirits, perhaps meaning smaller subjects and also emotions or spirits of the age. Mackey likely believes himself to be exceptionally witty and delightful with such constructions, but I find reading them to be approximately as entertaining as doing math homework.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 77. Derrida famously said, “*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*”: There is nothing outside of the text, or there is no outside to the text.

intended to shock the reader. Similarly, Mackey speaks of, “phallus-rattling,”⁵⁴ which also alludes to Derrida’s concept of phallogocentrism.

Mackey’s writing has come to exhibit the same sense of unrestrained play that he believes irony to possess. He encourages a reading that would leave “Kierkegaard’s text *liberated* to play out its (im)proper effect in uncontained fear and trembling.”⁵⁵ For him, irony is not serious about anything, not even nothing: “Irony is not serious about nothing. It only plays with it.”⁵⁶ In fact, one of the few times the reader gets a sense that Mackey’s later writing is serious about what it says is, paradoxically, when he rails against those who are determined to “take Kierkegaard seriously as a philosopher.”⁵⁷ Irony and play have so run away with Mackey he confesses that when he reads his early writings, he can scarcely recognize the “earnest young man” who wrote them and now finds that his earlier gravity “oppresses” and “embarrasses” him.⁵⁸ Such earnestness and gravity are contrary to this new deconstructionist mode with its indefeasible irony. No longer is he an earnest young man, but now (he says, surely with an ironic grin) he is “a thoroughly corrupt and unreliable sort” who is philosophically “little more than a dirty old man.”⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁵ Ibid., xvii.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁷ Ibid., xvii-xviii. After his critique of those who would make Kierkegaard a dreary academic, Mackey adds, “And now it seems I *am* getting serious” (Ibid., xviii).

⁵⁸ Ibid., xv.

⁵⁹ Ibid., xvi.

For Mackey, irony is so opposed to earnest commitments of any kind that, as Strawser notes,⁶⁰ he misreads Kierkegaard enough to conflate irony with doubt: “[P]hilosophy in the modern age begins with (Descartes’) doubt. But the modern age also begins with irony. Therefore (perhaps) doubt equals irony and irony equals doubt. On top of that, the only life worthy to be called human begins with irony, that is, with doubt.”⁶¹ He thinks that doubt/irony implies no affirmations at all, saying, “Wholly negative, ironic discourse cannot affirm anything. Nor can it negate, since every negation implies a corresponding affirmation as surely as every determination is also a negation,” making irony only “the nonbeing of abstract and indeterminate freedom that defines the essence of subjectivity.”⁶² Irony affirms nothing and just plays freely in its refusal to be tied down to commitments by relinquishing its doubt.⁶³

For Mackey, this doubt/irony is so potent that he is skeptical about one’s ability to master it: “Irony is the bottomless abyss. There is no return—apparently—from the

⁶⁰ Michael Strawser, *Both/And: Reading Kierkegaard from Irony to Edification* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 55n5.

⁶¹ Mackey (1986), 3. One has seen before that Mackey praises doubt more than does the Danish philosopher. Coming to an extremely un-Kierkegaardian conclusion, Mackey argues, “Kierkegaard says that faith always incorporates doubt as a sublated moment; so a belief in Christianity does not exclude but rather demands a real imaginative participation in paganism” (Mackey [1971], 293). Cf. *Pap. IV B 13:18 / JP 1*, 891.

⁶² Mackey (1986), 16. To be fair, sometimes in his dissertation Kierkegaard does make proclamations about irony that sound similar to these. We know, however, that he thinks there can be some kind of content associated with irony since Kierkegaard can say that Schlegel’s *Lucinde*, Kierkegaard’s example of the premiere work of modern irony by his premiere modern ironist, has “a highly doctrinaire character” and “a certain melancholy earnestness that runs through it” (*SKS 1*, 324 / *CI*, 290). What claims to be (and may even seem to be) sheer playfulness in fact has a serious and, Kierkegaard believes, pernicious agenda. Do not be distracted by little Wilhelmine’s kicking her legs in caprice; irony is serious business.

⁶³ Mackey’s absolutizing doubt is just as problematic as his absolutizing of irony. One never doubts except from a position of faith in some contrary position; one never ironizes except from a position of some earnest conception of life that makes the object of ridicule appear inadequate. Polemic and critique requires location, even if only a temporary one.

infinite.”⁶⁴ This leads to an interesting problem in his reading of Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Irony*, which he claims to be guided by, for at the very end of his dissertation Kierkegaard pens a few pages where his recommendation is precisely that, for a healthy human life, irony must be controlled or mastered.⁶⁵ For all of his praise of irony and defense of it against Hegel’s unfair dismissal, Kierkegaard refuses to let irony reign supreme in his dissertation, just as Climacus in *Postscript* refuses to let the comic be the highest. Even in his most concentrated work on the nature of irony, Kierkegaard refuses to give irony the last word. The deconstructionist, who otherwise is so admiring of *The Concept of Irony*,⁶⁶ is then brought up short at the end of the work and faced with a puzzle about how to understand what Kierkegaard is saying here. Fear not, however, for the enterprising deconstructionist is seldom long hindered by such roadblocks. Mackey’s solution, like that of many other deconstructionist readers of Kierkegaard, is to declare that this final chastening of irony is itself—irony. That is, one should not take Kierkegaard’s circumscription of the powers and range of irony as if it were intended earnestly. No, this master of irony knows all too well that irony is a juggernaut that cannot be slowed or stopped, and any seeming attempt to do so is merely another ironic illustration of irony’s unbounded powers. Since irony posits nothing, Kierkegaard’s ironic work on irony must erase itself as its final act, letting irony’s sheer freedom remain. As Mackey says:

[*The Concept of Irony*] concludes reassuringly with an epilogue which says that irony is the beginning of authentic human existence and the condition of the

⁶⁴ Mackey (1986), 21.

⁶⁵ *SKS* 1, 352-57 / *CI*, 324-29.

⁶⁶ Deconstructionist Paul de Man hailed Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Irony* as “the best book on irony that’s available” (Strawser, 29).

possibility of that repetition by which the human individual acquires a personal history. However, the epilogue itself, if it is not to lapse into the Hegelian dialectic and become an *aufgehoben* moment in the system it meant to destroy, must erase itself. It does. Ironically. And that—apparently—is no more than the last spasm of an organism already dead.⁶⁷

The epilogue is taken as an ironic self-erasure, so any hint that Kierkegaard may not in fact want to give the final victory to irony is thereby avoided. Irony will indeed be as insoluble as a bottomless abyss for one who takes an earnestly offered way out to be nothing more than yet another ironic revocation.

For Mackey, irony is maximized play, affirming and saying nothing. He believes it is possible, through irony, “to say something in such a way as to negate indeterminately what is said and at the same time negate the saying. It is possible to say, and to mean, nothing.”⁶⁸ There is no earnest inner self here that an exterior incognito of irony serves to hide. Kierkegaard would find it hard to recognize Mackey’s description as irony, save only as a form of “demonic” or “total irony” that evidences that irony is on the path of disintegration. For Kierkegaard, irony bridges the gap that enables an aesthete to become an ethicist and has the power to cultivate and hide a developing subjectivity. Kierkegaard himself frequently made use of irony “to say as a jest, jestingly, something that is meant in earnest.”⁶⁹ This means that even if it *were* determined that Kierkegaard is using irony in the epilogue to his dissertation, that in itself is not sufficient evidence to conclude that he is not engaged in earnest argument there. Irony is not self-erasure. It is incognito and

⁶⁷ Mackey (1986), 21.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁹ *SKS* 1, 287 / *CI*, 248.

the distinction between inner and outer, which means that it hides a self, nurturing it.⁷⁰ If so-called irony is emptiness, then there is no contradiction between inner and outer, and without contradiction there is no comic and thus no irony either. Irony's existence is predicated on some kind of inner self and some norm held by that self with some degree of earnestness. To argue for the absence of those is to argue, knowingly or not, against irony. The attempt to reduce Kierkegaard to a kind of unrestrained ironic play is, strangely, to fashion Kierkegaard into something nearly indistinguishable from the German Romantics whom he had criticized so harshly.

Summary

Louis Mackey holds an abiding importance for Kierkegaard scholarship because in 1971 he ignited the contemporary trend of reading Kierkegaard literarily. From the beginning, however, Mackey's method of doing this was to make a literary reading that was defined rather antagonistically against philosophical and theological readings. Now, it is more commonly accepted that doing due diligence to Kierkegaard as a literary artist is not necessarily to decide against his being a philosopher or theologian.⁷¹ Mackey's antagonism for philosophical and theological content in Kierkegaard, though, coupled with an approach that attempted to be exclusively "literary," led naturally to his

⁷⁰ For Kierkegaard, irony negates the phenomenon in order to conceal essence. It does not negate essence. It is true that irony does not negate the phenomenon in the name of positing a new phenomenon (and so is not "positive" in this way), but it does negate the phenomenon in the name of preserving essence (thus retaining this form of "positivity"). He says, "Now, essence is surely the negation of appearance, but it is not the absolute negation, since thereby essence itself would actually have disappeared. But to a certain degree, this is irony; it negates the phenomenal, not in order to posit by means of this negation, but negates the phenomenal altogether. It runs back instead of going out; it is not in the phenomenon but seeks to deceive with the phenomenon; the phenomenon exists not to disclose the essence but to conceal it" (*SKS* 1, 256-57.1 / *CI*, 212n).

⁷¹ E.g., Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

becoming a scholar in the Deconstructionist vein. Having ignited it, he no longer finds “literary” readings of Kierkegaard to be sufficient, for he thinks that they suffer from similar problems to those of philosophical and theological readings, such as relying too heavily on failed attempts to use linguistic structures to capture some meaning or signification.⁷² Even literary readings of Kierkegaard became too close to philosophical and theological ones for Mackey’s liking.

He was, consequently, greatly aided by irony. During his literary phase, irony was useful as a recognizably literary element that would foil philosophers and theologians in their unsubtly direct readings of Kierkegaard’s works. If it ever seemed that Kierkegaard was indeed earnestly presenting some content or arguing for something about the nature of God, humanity, or the world that he appeared to believe deeply in, then irony could serve as a convenient escape hatch to deny that earnestness was operative there after all. For the literarily interested, irony cannot be overlooked. Soon, however, irony’s great power opened up even further for Mackey. As Climacus tells us, irony is not merely a literary device, after all, but a manner of existing.⁷³ Irony is a lifestyle, and its vastness suddenly shows itself on a new scale for Mackey. Who can say to what extent that Kierkegaard was earnest in anything he did? Was it all irony for him, every word? Is Kierkegaard’s deeply ironical joke on us? Is his true lesson that there can be no lesson, or is even that repealed in irony? Indeterminacy is maximized, and any securities of structure, meaning, argument, content, etc. flee from irony’s sight. Mackey now finds Kierkegaard’s ambiguity to be so incalculable that he pays him the following

⁷² Mackey (1986), xxii.

⁷³ *SKS* 7, 457 / *CUP* 1, 503-4.

compliment: with Kierkegaard's works, "their ambiguity is almost perfectly illegible."⁷⁴ Kierkegaard's mastery is shown precisely in the impenetrable ambiguity of what he says. A lesser figure would stoop to the illusory securities of content, but Kierkegaard breaks off communication in a way that very few can manage. Søren Kierkegaard is now for us "an *ironic* subject who lurks behind a barricade of pseudonyms (including "Søren Kierkegaard") and withholds *himself* absolutely.... By virtue of his authorial self-restraint, his texts exhibit an almost perfect abstention from determinate meaning and an almost perfect recalcitrance to interpretation."⁷⁵

The only problem is that, to give this reading, one must have recourse to a definition of irony that is contrary to Kierkegaard's own. Kierkegaard was a very earnest man and a very ironic one too. Properly understood, those two claims are not in conflict at all. If it is an error to read Kierkegaard as solely listing a series of direct propositions, ignoring his irony entirely, it is equally a misreading to read Kierkegaard as engaging in the uproariously despairing play of an untamed irony, never to be earnest again. Mackey has simply advocated for the opposite side of an argument whose fundamental error remains unquestioned. He makes the same error in an opposite direction. Pitting earnestness against irony will only force the reader to choose which one to sacrifice in the name of the other. It is this false dilemma between two ways of misreading Kierkegaard that my work hopes to expose.

⁷⁴ Mackey (1986), xxii.

⁷⁵ Ibid., xxiii.

Roger Poole

Roger Poole's readings of Kierkegaard lie in a similar vein to Mackey's literary-turned-deconstructive readings. Poole's literary interests are just as prominent. For example, anyone considering even just the first page of the preface to his collected Kierkegaard passages, *The Laughter Is on My Side* (1989), will be struck by his sheer aesthetic delight in evocative language.⁷⁶ Like Mackey, two points in reading Kierkegaard that Poole has much passion to defend are: 1) that Kierkegaard's pseudonyms should be respected and not thoughtlessly conflated with Kierkegaard himself, and 2) that Kierkegaard's irony should not be missed in favor of forcing a direct reading out of him.⁷⁷ He is grateful for the effect that Mackey's *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* has had on the field since it preceded a couple of decades of what he considers to be improved scholarly focus on Kierkegaard's "sheer literary virtuosity,"⁷⁸ and he similarly believes that Kierkegaard is "first and foremost, a writer."⁷⁹ He credits Mackey, though, for also seeing that the literary reading of Kierkegaard inevitably proves to be inadequate.⁸⁰ Poole, then, also perceives a natural motion from "literary" readings of Kierkegaard to postmodern deconstructionist readings of him: "With this new 'literary' perception of his work [Kierkegaard] has taken on a new status as a postmodernist,

⁷⁶ Roger Poole, *The Laughter Is on My Side: An Imaginative Introduction to Kierkegaard*, eds., Roger Poole and Henrik Stangerup (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 1. Poole speaks of listening to Mozart and Monteverdi at the estate of an Italian-style château painted in "Italian tints of ochre and sienna" while enjoying a huge balsam poplar and the buzzing of bees, etc.

⁷⁷ Poole (1998), 60.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 48.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 61. Like Mackey, Poole even cites the motto of the New Critics that a poem should not mean but be (Roger Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication* [Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1993], 5).

⁸⁰ Poole (1998), 67.

someone who, in a certain sense, is writing ‘after Derrida’ in what Harold Bloom would call an *apophrades*.’⁸¹ Indeed, in Poole’s organization of his material on 20th Century receptions of Kierkegaard, he places the tradition of readings that starts with Mackey’s *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* not under the heading of “Literary Readings” but under “The Deconstructive Turn.”⁸²

As with Mackey, Poole’s literary taste and predilection for deconstructionist readings of Kierkegaard lend him a strong antipathy against what he calls the “blunt” readings of philosophers and theologians. He says, “In spite of the dramatic and dialectical structure of Kierkegaard’s texts, though, the tradition of ‘blunt reading’ insists on interpreting him as a ‘serious’ writer who is didactic, soluble and at bottom, ‘edifying.’”⁸³ Poole objects to Walter Lowrie’s position, which he describes as teaching that “[Kierkegaard’s] aesthetic works were written to propose a clear and coherent philosophical doctrine.”⁸⁴ He further complains that, despite the fact that “by design, there is no certainty to be had” in Kierkegaard’s *Repetition*, “from Walter Lowrie to Niels Thulstrup and beyond, the search for what Kierkegaard ‘meant’ by *repetition* goes

⁸¹ Ibid., 48-49. Many of the Kierkegaard scholars in this school have a strong intuition that Kierkegaard is anticipating Derrida’s later project. Poole says that Kierkegaard “uses all the major tools of deconstructive theory long before they were given a local habitation and a name by Derrida” (Poole [1993], 7). This belief also functions as a convenient excuse for the insertion of words from Derrida and other Deconstructionists into Kierkegaard’s mouth in order to frame the 19th Century Dane’s project. That 20th and 21st Century concerns could be on the mind of a 19th Century thinker is then attributed to Kierkegaard’s genius and foresight.

⁸² Poole (1998), 66.

⁸³ Ibid., 61. Poole accuses C. Stephen Evans of being a part of this “blunt reading” tradition, criticizing him for attempting to “solve” and “make sense” of *Philosophical Fragments* (Ibid.). For Evans’ brief defense against this charge, see Evans (2006), 340n5.

⁸⁴ Poole (1993), 10.

wearily on.”⁸⁵ The complexity and nuance of Kierkegaard’s literary skill and practice of indirect communication must surely be lost on “the plain, honest mind” of Walter Lowrie⁸⁶ and others who follow him into the blunt error of reading Kierkegaard univocally.⁸⁷ Instead, Poole prefers to speak of Kierkegaard’s “passionate and ambiguous private journal” and his “rich and ambivalent work”⁸⁸ since in Kierkegaard’s writings “the artistic devices of dialogue and displacement play their role until the very end, forbidding any withdrawal to ‘higher’ conceptual ground.”⁸⁹

Unsurprisingly, to aid his point that Kierkegaard has no clear position in his writings, Poole, like Mackey, turns to irony. He says of Kierkegaard, “Nothing in the published books, and indeed nothing in the privacy of the Journal, can be read without an eye to the possibility of irony. Irony was his mask and his rapier. The ‘constant reference to Socrates’ lasted a lifetime.”⁹⁰ In fact, he says that the “only event” in Kierkegaard’s life that he did not take ironically “but with highest seriousness” was his

⁸⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁸⁶ Poole (1998), 59.

⁸⁷ Poole (1993), 7-8. It is not clear to me why Mackey, Poole, and others conflate the position that Kierkegaard’s texts have philosophical content with the position that Kierkegaard’s texts have a single univocal message. One can, it is clear, have a position on matters without one’s works being reduced to a single note. Also, one can have a complex message or even multiple messages without degenerating into infinite and impenetrably ironic play. Moreover, a philosopher might even *change his mind* over time, having publications that do not agree with one another, without having to face the charge that he has no content whatever since his works do not agree at every point. The conflation of univocity with the position of having any content at all leads one to think that Mackey and Poole are fighting caricatures rather than actual philosophers and theologians.

⁸⁸ Poole (1998), 48.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 64.

⁹⁰ Poole (1989), 7. The last sentence alludes to the subtitle of Kierkegaard’s dissertation on irony.

engagement to Regine.⁹¹ Poole explains how Kierkegaard's irony is an implicit rejection of the attempt to find a position or argument in Kierkegaard's writings:

[Kierkegaard's] books were written in an ironic, sophisticated, parodic style that allowed of no clear position for the reader and allowed of no definite result either.... His irony and his many-voiced-ness, his *heteroglossia*, distance him from any position that could be asserted to be finally "his" position.... [Kierkegaard's] playing just within, and yet just outside of, the conventions of the ruling "Romantic Irony" of his time...has made any final "closure" on the matter of "his" meaning impossible.⁹²

He adds that Kierkegaard used "an unremitting irony that did not allow of the reader's 'placing' him as author within his own thought-process."⁹³

Kierkegaard and the German Romantics

Even if it is a deficit in respect to his exegesis of Kierkegaard's philosophical identity and project, Poole is at least consistent enough to say that Kierkegaard's near universal irony and lack of earnestness would make him an ally and student of the German Romantics. In a parody of Kierkegaard's exposure of P. L. Møller's association with *The Corsair*, Poole writes, "Kierkegaard was writing under the influence of the German Romantic Ironists. Where Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde* is, there is Kierkegaard."⁹⁴ He is exactly right that this is who Kierkegaard must be given Poole's understanding of what Kierkegaard's irony is, but his desire to remain consistent with his inadequate understanding of Kierkegaard's irony has led him to a frankly bizarre position of having to argue for Kierkegaard's affinity with those for whom he had such trenchant

⁹¹ Ibid. Note how Poole contrasts irony with seriousness.

⁹² Poole (1998), 48.

⁹³ Ibid., 59.

⁹⁴ Poole (1989), 14.

criticism. In his dissertation, Kierkegaard accuses Schlegel's *Lucinde* of being an attempt to suspend all ethics, cancelling actuality.⁹⁵ He says that letting fantasy triumph like this "exhausts and anesthetizes the soul, robs it of all moral tension, makes life a dream. But this is essentially what *Lucinde* attempts to promote...."⁹⁶ He continues, "It is a weakness to want to forget.... [T]his is horrible, soft cowardice."⁹⁷ Hardly a ringing endorsement. Kierkegaard had scorn and disdain for Schlegel's *Lucinde*, seeing it as a pole to avoid when trying to appropriate irony in a healthy way. It is hard to understand how Poole manages to misread Kierkegaard's treatment of Schlegel's *Lucinde* to such a degree that he associates the two as having a similar position. This observation extends to other areas of Poole's works, such as when he describes Kierkegaard's walks around Copenhagen as "both Socratic and Romantic-ironic" and having a "free-floating, unengaged spirit as described by Friedrich Schlegel, unattached, passionless, committed to no cause, achieving no aim, and serenely indifferent to whatever might befall."⁹⁸ Kierkegaard was many things, perhaps, but aimless, passionless, and indifferent he was not. Nor was he indifferent in his estimation of German Romanticism, instead judging books like Schlegel's *Lucinde* to be "immoral."⁹⁹

⁹⁵ SKS 1, 324-25 / CI, 289-90.

⁹⁶ SKS 1, 326.1 / CI, 292n.

⁹⁷ SKS 1, 329 / CI, 295.

⁹⁸ Poole (1993), 15.

⁹⁹ SKS 1, 330 / CI, 296-97.

Theological vs. Literary Readings

Because Poole misunderstands Kierkegaard's theory of irony and its intimate relation with earnestness, he also misunderstands its relation to religious existence and to ultimately theological concerns. Poole is as dismissive of readings that presume Kierkegaard is engaged in a theological and religious project as he is of ones that presume Kierkegaard might have something to contribute to the field of philosophy. Giving a capsule of his *bête noir*, the "blunt reading," Poole describes it as the type of reading that "refuses, as a matter of principle, to accord a literary status to the text," ignores the implications of pseudonymity, misses the irony, is unaware of the Romantic ironic conditions that were influential while Kierkegaard was writing, and "will not acknowledge, on religious grounds, that an 'indirect communication' is at least partly bound in with the *pathos* of the lived life."¹⁰⁰ Note that Poole characterizes the giving of such blunt readings as an attitude problem that "refuses." Further, it refuses "on religious grounds" to see the literary markings present in Kierkegaard's works. Reading Kierkegaard from a religious perspective, he implies, will tend to lead to a misreading of Kierkegaard that will downplay his literary elements, like irony, for the sake of finding a falsely unifying message of theological content. But, he says, there is no such message in the infinitely elusive Kierkegaard: "[Kierkegaard] insists on diremption to the last, and only the determinedly 'theological' reading can manage to 'unify' so many jarringly different accounts of what it is to be a 'Christian self.'"¹⁰¹ Finding a theological message,

¹⁰⁰ Poole (1998), 60.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 63.

instead of “diremption to the last,” is an imposition upon Kierkegaard’s masterful ironic ambiguity.

Kierkegaard, however, does not think that insensitivity to literary excellence is a price that one must pay in order to have theological content. Kierkegaard said that books like *Lucinde* “are not only immoral but also unpoetic, for they are irreligious.”¹⁰² So far is a religious work from being antagonistic to aesthetic excellence, Kierkegaard is bold enough to suggest that a work that is *insufficiently* religious in orientation will fail to be properly poetic. In Kierkegaard’s eyes, it is the supposedly literary work of “diremption to the last” that stands accused of being a “blunt reading” that fails religiously and, consequently, fails aesthetically as well. Consider, how could such a work of diremption give a satisfactory embodiment of irony if it rejects or enervates such elements essential to irony’s nature as selfhood, inner vs. outer, and a mastered irony that puts itself in service to an advancement towards the religious? Remember that for Kierkegaard it is the religious person who sees the comic and its forms *most clearly* of all.¹⁰³

Religiousness and its concomitant theological doctrines held earnestly are not antithetical to irony, and whoever thinks so (whether it comes from the pro-irony camp or the pro-religion camp) has misunderstood irony, religiousness, or, more likely, both. As many other deconstructive readers of Kierkegaard do, Poole observes that Kierkegaard refers to himself as the “Master of Irony.”¹⁰⁴ This appellative, they seem to think, strengthens their case for describing Kierkegaard as one who uses irony in uncontrolled

¹⁰² SKS 1, 330 / CI, 297.

¹⁰³ SKS 7, 420 / CUP 1, 462.

¹⁰⁴ Poole (1993), 19. See XIII 552 / POV, 66.

superabundance throughout his life. When Kierkegaard calls himself a master of irony, however, it is not because irony has mastered him but because he has mastered it. To call himself a master of irony is not a confession that all is play, meaningless infinite diremption, and impenetrable ambiguity. It is just the opposite: a confession of his ethical earnestness and indeed his confessionally religious status that puts irony so felicitously as a resource at his disposal. A master of irony looks more like Kierkegaard's description at the end of his dissertation than the scholar of deconstruction.

Indirect Communication and Architectonic Structure

Two final points should be made about Poole's conception of irony and its likelihood of *causing* blunt misreadings of Kierkegaard, especially on ethics, religiousness, and irony itself, rather than correcting them. First, Poole's misunderstanding of irony means that he also misunderstands Kierkegaard's "indirect communication," of which irony should be understood as an important type. Poole, however, understands "indirect communication" to refer to Kierkegaard's architectonic strategy that includes writing two streams of literature that are designed to cancel one another out in a way that leaves the reader alone to reflect on his own existence.¹⁰⁵ So, for him, pseudonymity is not an example of indirect communication but a piece in a larger strategy of indirect communication.¹⁰⁶ Poole, then, is not disposed to see irony as

¹⁰⁵ Poole (1993), 4-5, 9; Poole (1998), 59. Poole says of "indirect communication": "It is difficult to see what else could have been meant or intended by that phrase" (Poole [1993], 4). Doubtless it would be difficult to see what else Kierkegaard might have meant by that phrase, given Poole's misunderstanding of irony.

¹⁰⁶ Poole (1993), 4.

an example of indirect communication as such,¹⁰⁷ partly because of his conception of this architectonic structure and partly because he does not believe that Kierkegaard's irony is communication at all, since it has no position or meaning to communicate. Rightly understood, though, true irony has a position and a message to convey, for those who have ears to hear it.

Second, in order to justify the architectonic structure of Kierkegaard's "indirect communication," Poole must sharply define Kierkegaard's "aesthetic" works against his "edifying" works.¹⁰⁸ It should be conceded that there are important differences between Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works and his upbuilding works written in his own name, and "aesthetic" and "edifying" could serve as useful tags for these differences. Poole takes this to an exaggerated and unhelpful place, however. The "aesthetic" works, he says, "do not mean" since their form is directly opposed to their apparent meaning.¹⁰⁹ In contrast, "the *Edifying Discourses* are written in a kind of pietistic underfelt. The pseudonyms attack abstract problems at the abstract level, while the *Discourses* are simple, practical and applied."¹¹⁰ Both sets of descriptions are mistaken. In particular, the description of Kierkegaard's upbuilding discourses as "simple" causes one to wonder how extensively and how carefully Poole could have read them.

This exaggerated distinction between the aesthetic and edifying works holds in respect to irony as well. Poole could say that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous aesthetic

¹⁰⁷ He makes peculiar claims about irony and indirect communication. For example, he asks, "But is Kierkegaard's indirect communication almost co-extensive with the use of irony? Yes, before 1846. But not after" (Ibid., 19).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹¹⁰ Poole (1989), 9.

works, especially his early ones, were “permeated by irony.”¹¹¹ He believes that this changed radically for Kierkegaard after the *Corsair* Affair of 1846, after which point irony no longer became an option for him: “That *The Corsair* attacked in 1846 meant that the entire town became ironic, and [Kierkegaard] himself had therefore to abandon that manner of indirection anyway, for one cannot efficiently manage irony in the face of irony.”¹¹² Poole claims, therefore, that irony is “just not available for use” in Kierkegaard’s upbuilding discourses after 1846.¹¹³ Such an absolute claim is strikingly at odds with Kierkegaard’s opinion on the matter, since on the subject of his *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, which was published after 1846, Kierkegaard speaks freely about the presence and function of irony there, as previously noted.¹¹⁴ Kierkegaard is very able to speak of irony in his writings, despite supposedly being merely “simple, practical and applied” upbuilding discourses and despite coming after 1846, at which point Poole asserts that irony can no longer be effectively managed by Kierkegaard. What is more, Kierkegaard has the audacity to speak of such irony in conjunction with the earnest matter of the ethical, saying that the relation between facticity and ideality is “simultaneously just as much moral and ethical as it is ironic.”¹¹⁵ *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* has an earnest interest in human upbuilding, and irony’s presence there does not cut against that goal. Rather, it furthers it, for how will a reader be able to take

¹¹¹ Poole (1993), 16.

¹¹² Ibid., 21. It is another peculiar claim to say that one cannot manage irony in the face of irony. I cannot myself think of a compelling reason why this must be so. Besides, if it were true that, somehow, one cannot manage irony in the face of irony, then how could the city of Copenhagen have managed irony in the face of the irony that Kierkegaard had presented for years in his aesthetic writings?

¹¹³ Ibid., 19.

¹¹⁴ NB:129 / UDVS, 388-90.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

in this message and advance his subjective development towards the single individual without existentially making use of the discourses' resources of irony, which is the very means of that development?

One sees how blunt Poole's own readings of Kierkegaard are capable of being, and his conception of irony lies at the center of the problem. Poole calls Kierkegaard "the ironist,"¹¹⁶ as if it is his very identity, and Poole's defining irony against any real earnestness or position creates difficulties for his analysis: "The greater part of the secondary literature has tried to thrust aside the play of the supplement in order to come at 'the meaning.' I work on the opposite assumption. It is the constant play of the supplement that *is* the meaning; or at least it is as much of the meaning as the reader is going to be allowed to deduce."¹¹⁷ To say that the constant play is the meaning is in fact to say that there is no "meaning" because the play of irony excludes serious content. As Mackey does, Poole also defines irony against earnestness, making a hash of both concepts. Since irony is present, Poole argues that it is fruitless and foolish to look within for some meaning. He says that every one of Kierkegaard's texts (perhaps meaning only the aesthetic texts?) "is a kind of torso of the unexpressed, a mere pointer to the inexpressible."¹¹⁸ He describes Kierkegaard's process of "nonreferential writing": "He sets up literary machines that, like those of the Dadaists, actually work but carry out no function at all. Kierkegaard writes text after text whose aim is not to state a truth, not to clarify an issue, not to propose a definite doctrine, not to offer some 'meaning' that

¹¹⁶ Poole (1993), 16.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 5.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 10.

could be directly appropriated.”¹¹⁹ I posit that Poole misreads so much of what Kierkegaard says because even when Poole is reading Kierkegaard he is not reading Kierkegaard but Derrida: “Kierkegaard, writing a century before Derrida, worked out for himself a rhetoric of *trace*, of *différance*, and of *supplément* with which he could oppose the Danish Hegelians.”¹²⁰ Derrida and other Deconstructionists are controlling the narrative for Poole as well as the content.¹²¹ In such a situation, “irony” and other terms get read as a 20th and 21st Century deconstructionist would understand them, not as Kierkegaard so painstakingly defines them. Kierkegaard intended his irony to be a way of preserving his work from being absorbed into the Hegel’s project, but Poole and others have taken that very irony and neatly claimed it for Derrida’s deconstructive project. To do such a thing so thoroughly that one becomes convinced it is a correct interpretation of Kierkegaard is to give a blunt reading indeed.

Summary

Like Mackey, Poole appreciates Kierkegaard’s literary skills but sets them in opposition to the presence of philosophical and theological argument such that evidence of the former in Kierkegaard is taken to prove the absence of the latter. Specifically, the presence of irony is taken to prove the absence of earnestness. This mistaken

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 5-6.

¹²¹ A few examples: “The answer to this is that, after Derrida and de Man, we are now able to read Kierkegaard as he read Hegel” (Ibid., 60).

“[Kierkegaard] knew, before Derrida, that *il n’y a pas de hors texte*, and he would have agreed with the de Manian assertion that ‘the impossibility of reading should not be taken too lightly’” (Ibid., 11).

“In the ninth and final chapter, then, the Kierkegaardian doctrine of the *Imitatio Christi* and the lived sign are examined in an effort to analyze a form of expression that would allow the re-posing of certain questions after Derrida” (Ibid., 26).

understanding of irony, similar to Mackey's, leads Poole to some surprising conclusions that are difficult to justify from Kierkegaard's texts. For example, he argues that Kierkegaard's project is to be identified with that of the German Romantics, including that of Schlegel's *Lucinde*, that irony is not to be essentially identified with Kierkegaard's project of indirect communication, and that Kierkegaard's aesthetic and edifying works are to be sharply distinguished and separated from one another. Poole's conclusions appear to be strongly influenced by a desire to read Kierkegaard as if he were a Deconstructionist child of Derrida rather than an aesthetically virtuosic defender of orthodox Christianity.

Elsebet Jegstrup

Though not as prominent as Mackey, Poole, and Taylor in the field of Kierkegaard studies, Elsebet Jegstrup is notable for encouraging readings of Kierkegaard that are friendly to Deconstruction by hosting a conference in Augusta, Georgia in 2001 and for editing a 2004 anthology, *The New Kierkegaard*, taken largely from that conference. Like the others, Jegstrup believes that Kierkegaard is "for all intents and purposes, a deconstructive philosopher,"¹²² adding, "Thus Kierkegaard puts everything into question; *he* begins the deconstructive project, and he does so in order to show that grand theoretical constructs are just that and hence ripe for deconstruction."¹²³ Thanks to

¹²² Elsebet Jegstrup, ed., *The New Kierkegaard* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 1.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 8.

Derrida and his deconstructive approach, “now the hermeneutic project of the Kierkegaardian texts is again relevant.”¹²⁴

She also argues for Kierkegaard’s sympathy with aestheticism and its ties to deconstruction. After quoting a passage about the nature of a poet from the beginning of *Either/Or*, she adds, “This is deconstruction’s territory, a territory Kierkegaard’s thinking constantly falls into, a territory that always already withdraws from our grasp yet shows itself without language as deconstruction circles it, approaches it from all angles without ever being able to say what it is—because it remains unnameable.”¹²⁵

Against Logocentrism and Exclusion

Jegstrup narrates the enemy of Deconstruction—and of Kierkegaard’s method—as “logocentrism.” This is a similar critique to what was seen before. She sets up a false dilemma, saying that Kierkegaard focuses on the *how* rather than “logocentrism’s *what* of the unnameable self,”¹²⁶ as if having content of any kind would be antithetical to innovative accounts of the *how*. In this defense of Deconstruction against logocentrism, as in other areas, Jegstrup shows signs that she might have a somewhat chastened position from earlier defenders of her position. For example, she is not as strident in declaring that her reading of Kierkegaard is against that of philosophy as such, conceding that Kierkegaard is a philosopher and being willing to discuss his philosophy of

¹²⁴ Ibid. Apparently, Jegstrup does not believe that Kierkegaard has much of anything to say that is outside of the concerns of Deconstruction. From her perspective, Kierkegaard is greatly indebted to Derrida for making him relevant again.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 7.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

existence.¹²⁷ This is a concession that Kierkegaard was doing a certain *kind* of philosophy, which may have virtues in defending against other *kinds* of philosophy. Even so, her concession is an unusual one that occasionally sounds as if it has returned to an opposition to reason *qua* reason. She denies this in several places, saying that Kierkegaard's deconstruction does not abandon all reason but does abandon "the circumscribed rationality of modern philosophy in favor of a larger embrace."¹²⁸ She believes that the rationality of modern philosophy is uncomfortably restrictive, preferring deconstruction's intentionally making room for an unnamed alterity. Despite insisting that it is only the *exclusivity* of reason's power that she questions,¹²⁹ though, she criticizes a quality at the heart of reason itself, pitying logocentrism as so rule-bound that it "cannot accept logical contradictions."¹³⁰ Deconstruction, including Kierkegaard's project, is implied to be superior to logocentrism because it can accept logical contradictions.

Putting aside for the moment that Jegstrup's distinguishing between types of reason would require for her to engage in logocentrism's dreaded task of preserving logical distinctions uncontradicted, is it fair for this position to be described as "a larger embrace," as if it accepts everything that logocentrism does...and more? She talks as if deconstruction has transcended logocentrism's small-minded exclusivity: "[W]hat is *other* cannot be the territory of a logocentric reading of text. Logocentrism has to reduce what is other to the same in order to examine it using the rules of the box. Logocentrism

¹²⁷ Ibid., 1.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 2.

is exclusive, while deconstruction is inclusive.”¹³¹ Of course, she must *exclude* logocentrism and its methods in favor of her own deconstructive approach, which concedes the necessity to make some kind of exclusive distinctions in human thought. She claims not to, being so generous as to permit logocentrism as one more way (however inadequate) of reading texts.¹³² Her true position comes out, though, when she reveals logocentrism as inimical to existence since it is inimical to alterity and the unnameable: “*either existence or logocentrism.*”¹³³ Once again, even to say this is to make a logical distinction that depends upon hated “exclusion.”¹³⁴ One cannot take seriously her suggestion that logocentrism would be a welcome dialogue partner in Jegstrup’s own deconstructive project. Her selections for *The New Kierkegaard* are a testimony to her deconstructive exclusiveness.

An ally in Hegel? Aside from questions about the coherence of a project that accepts logical contradictions—and there are many—one may also raise the question of how faithful this characterization is of Kierkegaard’s philosophical position. Jegstrup’s claims that philosophy is acceptable as long as it is a philosophy that does not exclude and that reason is acceptable as long as it is a reason that accepts contradictions, sounds more at home in a philosophy like Hegel’s than Kierkegaard’s. Hegel’s philosophy was one where reason could overcome contradiction and opposition to result in a higher unity,

¹³¹ Ibid., 3.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid., 6.

¹³⁴ Though even this gets potentially withdrawn or complicated by Jegstrup’s comment that in Danish *Enten—Eller* (“Either/Or”) is separated by a dash, not a slash, which she suggests is an indication that the choice between “either” and “or” is not a truly exclusive choice but a moment of deconstructive undecidability (Ibid., 12n13). If this proposition from a dubious principle of Danish grammar is to be taken seriously, then one could propose to Jegstrup that she allow even logocentrism into her inclusive embrace instead of continually defining her position against it.

not excluding any facet of reality but incorporating history, religion, art, etc. Kierkegaard was decidedly opposed to this “more inclusive” reason, defending Aristotle’s principle of contradiction. Indeed, Hegel’s cancellation of this principle was an annoyance to him, and this theme shows up periodically in his writings.¹³⁵ Indeed, Kierkegaard’s principle of the infinite qualitative difference between the eternal divine and temporal human existence depends on preserving the two as intraversable by humans, even by exalted human faculties like reason.¹³⁶ Jegstrup fails to see that it is Hegel, not Kierkegaard, who would be more sympathetic to Jegstrup’s more inclusive definition of reason. That is, her position is extremely amenable to the philosophical systems that Kierkegaard fought against and Jegstrup claims to.¹³⁷ Unknowingly, her attempt at redefining reason plays into the hand of exactly the systems, totalitarianisms, and power structures that she wants to oppose. Her deconstructive critique would, I suggest, be more successful if it followed Kierkegaard more faithfully rather than adopting some hybrid and Hegelinaized version of him.

¹³⁵ Kierkegaard was well aware, as Jegstrup seems not to be, that even to reject Aristotle’s principle of contradiction is tacitly to endorse it, despite one’s wishes. Climacus presents the argument this way: “But here I shall stop. Even if I were a better dialectician than I am, I would still have my limits. Basically, an unshakable insistence upon the absolute and absolute distinctions is precisely what makes a good dialectician. This is something we in our day have completely disregarded by cancelling and in cancelling the principle of contradiction, without perceiving what Aristotle indeed emphasized, that the thesis that the principle of contradiction is canceled is based upon the principle of contradiction, since otherwise the opposite thesis, that it is not canceled, is equally true” (SKS 4, 304-5 / PF, 108-9). Cf. SKS 7, 277-79 / CUP 1, 304-6.

¹³⁶ Cf. JJ:261 / JP 1, 705.

¹³⁷ Mark C. Taylor argues that Hegel’s thought undercuts all opposition and objection: “By grounding his thought in the principle of negation, Hegel creates a system in which explicit opposition is implicit agreement. If negation is affirmation, resistance appears to be impossible and Hegelianism always seems to have the last word” (Mark C. Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel & Kierkegaard* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2000], x). Taylor goes on to argue, rightly, that from Kierkegaard’s vantage it is not he with his reliance on disjunctive reason who destroys otherness but Hegel: “From Kierkegaard’s point of view, the Hegelian dialectic mediates opposites in a way that both demands and destroys otherness.... Kierkegaard concludes that efforts to the contrary notwithstanding, Hegel collapses difference in identity, thereby dissolving the tensions inherent in concrete human existence” (Ibid., xiii).

Undecidability and existence. Additionally, Jegstrup thinks that undoing the strong contradictions of traditional Western “logocentric” philosophy is an aid to existence. In fact many Deconstructionists talk about the condition of “undecidability” that “nevertheless requires decision” as being the ethic of deconstruction.¹³⁸ Somehow, undecidability is thought to be a truer account of reality since the clarity of traditional reason and language is a false and oppressive clarity. Again, Kierkegaard disagrees. One of the central tasks of his philosophy was to make clear distinctions between things (E.g., the aesthete and the ethicist in *Either/Or*, the ethical and the religious in *Fear and Trembling*, the Socratic and the Christian in *Philosophical Fragments*, etc.) so that one understood one’s options when choosing how to live, whatever one decides in the end. The obscuring of clear choices and the undermining of the opposition between them is exactly antithetical to his project and, he believes, harmful for one’s human existence. Climacus expresses the danger of annulling the principle of contradiction for one’s existence: “[T]he annulment of the principle of contradiction, if it is going to be something and not be a literary whim in the imagination of a fanciful being, means for an existing person that he himself has ceased to exist.”¹³⁹ Annulling the principle of contradiction, if this is indeed taken seriously as Jegstrup appears to, would be deadly for the task of human existence. Once again, Jegstrup and the Deconstructionists try to claim Kierkegaard’s support for positions directly opposed to his own.

¹³⁸ Jegstrup, 6.

¹³⁹ *SKS* 7, 317 / *CUP* 1, 347. Maundering is worse even than making a somewhat ill-considered decision (*SKS* 7, 450 / *CUP* 1, 497).

Irony as Playing with Possibilities

What, though, does this discussion have to do with irony? Like the other Deconstructionists, Jegstrup is impressed by the depth and extent of Kierkegaard's powers of irony, expressing agreement with Caputo that "the depth and the seriousness of the ironic, as Kierkegaard apparently perceived it, reveals itself, interrupting any comfort we may have had about this mood that seemingly pervades Kierkegaard's thinking."¹⁴⁰ Irony is so inherently disruptive and unstable that one can never become comfortable with it. Jegstrup identifies irony along with pseudonyms and subtexts as "aporias" that serve as clues for how to read Kierkegaard.¹⁴¹ Irony is also play, as it is for so many Deconstructionists. This is important since "the *only* way to get behind modern thinking's fortifications is by subterfuge, by trickery, by play."¹⁴² Thus, Jegstrup agrees with these qualities of irony and sees them as operative in Kierkegaard, but the quality of irony that appears to be most important to her here is its safeguarding of possibilities.¹⁴³ Because the play of irony is operative in a text, its meaning cannot be reduced by logocentrism to a single meaning or a coherent argument. Multiple readings and multiple possibilities are opened up, and it is this abundant multiplicity that deconstructive scholars delight in gathering up in the spirit of inclusiveness. Irony's preservation of

¹⁴⁰ Jegstrup, 10-11. When she speaks of the "seriousness" of irony, Jegstrup seems to mean something akin to "the seriousness of irony's disruptive powers" or "irony's serious implications for our conceptions of the world."

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 72. "What we learn from Kierkegaard is that deconstruction penetrates the possibilities and impossibilities of existence. Thus deconstruction discloses human experience as subject to the aporias of existence, aporias that defy all explanation" (Ibid., 4).

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ As Kierkegaard says regarding Romantic irony, "For the ironist, everything is possible.... But we cannot blame the ironist for finding it so difficult to become something, because when one has such a prodigious multitude of possibilities it is not easy to choose" (SKS 1, 317-18 / CI, 282).

possibility is why Jegstrup can speak of “the generosity of the ironic,”¹⁴⁴ and it is that generosity that logocentrism sins against when it ignores irony in order to read bluntly.

Irony, then, invites one to play in the text, and it is a play so free that it does not even scorn contradictory readings. A problem is struck, though, when one wants to *limit* readings in some way. For example, regarding the organization of her own anthology, Jegstrup goes out of her way to insist that she is not trying to force a certain narrative upon her readers by having made a predetermined arrangement: “Generally speaking, [the essays in *The New Kierkegaard*] have been located in a non-hierarchical sequence that presupposes no connections, no links, no relationships. They appear here only for the purpose of showing the breadth and depth of Kierkegaard’s unusual and complex thinking.”¹⁴⁵ Some might think that it could be an *advantage* to arrange essays in an anthology with a certain theme or relationship in mind. Does not a proper dialogue presume such connections? Hierarchical readings are unpopular in such circles since they are thought to imply oppressive power structures, linguistic violence, etc., but what if a reading calls for it? Will reading hierarchically be excluded on principle, in which case inclusiveness is sacrificed? For instance, Kierkegaard holds to a hierarchical arrangement of his stages of existence, and the hierarchy implies value judgments on the adequacy of each stage to accommodate and nurture human existence. If Kierkegaard *wants* to be read hierarchically, including many presupposed connections and relationships, then it is not a “neutral” reading that places Kierkegaard in opposition to this position. Deconstruction has many presuppositions of its own, and it cannot claim to

¹⁴⁴ Jegstrup, 73.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 10.

be more “inclusive” than other readings as such without careful qualification. Every affirmation is also a negation of something else, and Deconstruction cannot escape this necessity through sheer good will.

Limiting readings is a difficulty for Jegstrup, even though at places she expresses the desire to do so. While she says that deconstruction “distinguishes multiple perspectives from which no one meaning can be discerned,” Jegstrup insists that this does not reduce everything to total relativism or nihilism.¹⁴⁶ If this is so, one wonders what criteria can be used to distinguish among the multiplicity of readings. Would not this judging be an imposition of a worldview onto the text, entailing the exclusion of some readings? Would this not be an accommodation to the errors of logocentrism? If deconstruction truly rejects nihilism, would a nihilistic reading be permitted as one of the multiple perspectives? Jegstrup does not want to stifle meanings by imposing a metaphysics or an exclusive logic on the text: “Imagine all the cropping up with no order, no obvious purpose, no demands, no whys. Like wild flowers, these croppings are just *there*, interrupting the economy of everydayness; they are just *there* to be received in their fragmented natural state that speaks to us of the arbitrariness of existence.”¹⁴⁷ This hermeneutic equivalent to biology’s “spontaneous generation” raises the question of what happens when weeds crop up in the field, stifling the cropping up of more wild flowers. Is there not a role for a good gardener to play, knowing when to fertilize, how to cultivate, that could result in a cropping up that is both increased and healthier? If there

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 2. Again showing signs of a chastened position, Jegstrup defends deconstruction against the charge of nihilism. While the two should not be simply equated, it is necessary that Deconstructionists justify why their position does not descend into nihilism since it easily moves very close to it.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 86.

is truly no purpose, no “why” to the situation, then how can Jegstrup even evaluate the cropping up of a multitude of meanings as a positive result? Is this not also the imposition of a metaphysics or a moral standard? Even if Jegstrup desires not to relax into the easy equivalence of all readings through total relativism, it is hard to see how there can be a helpful evaluation of readings when one is methodologically committed to being indiscriminately inclusive of alterity.

The generosity of the ironic, then, is valued by Jegstrup because, she thinks, it “explosively interrupts” the “total-view” of logocentrism and other hegemonic forms of Western thought.¹⁴⁸ Its function as an aporia is not a drawback but a virtue. Irony resists the closing off of reasoned conclusion, then, even to the point of tolerating contradictions. It keeps one open to inclusiveness and to the unnameable. It is true, as Jegstrup suggests, that irony throws up ambiguities and possibilities of meaning. The auditor’s difficulty in penetrating the incognito of irony, however, is to be conceptually distinguished from a supposed irony whose existence lies incoherently in multiplicity, self-contradiction, or ambiguity. Consider Kierkegaard’s example of his conversation with a man where he admitted that he was ironical and then, to be consistent with that irony, withdrew behind an incognito of irony such that the man struggled to understand what Kierkegaard was doing.¹⁴⁹ The man’s attempted readings probably expanded into a vast multiplicity: “Has Kierkegaard gone mad? Is he mocking me? Is he talking about something that I am just too slow to pick up on? Is he quoting a play that I am unfamiliar with? Is this an example of the irony Kierkegaard was speaking of? Etc.” Indeed, the man even guessed the

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 73.

¹⁴⁹ NB5:147 / JP 2, 1753.

answer but had no confidence in his conclusions due to Kierkegaard's masterful irony. But the confusion of the man and his difficulty in seeing through a multiplicity of options is not to be equated with Kierkegaard's personally existing in a confusion of possibilities, devolving into purely infinite play. That the man was in aporia does not mean that Kierkegaard was. Kierkegaard was about the earnest business of being consistent with his own understanding of a character-role and with testing this man's subjectivity to see if he could appropriate Kierkegaard's instruction.¹⁵⁰ Kierkegaard had a worldview that he was implementing through irony, including a hierarchy of value, and was not permitting the cultivating of wild flowers to no purpose. Kierkegaard was not entertaining contradictory meanings; he was testing his interlocutor to see if he was sufficiently developed in subjectivity to grasp what was happening. Far from being reflexively inclusive, irony delights in *paring down*, in removing unhelpful elements that hinder growth and removing one's subjectivity from unhealthy fraternizing with society, which is why irony is what transitions one into ethical individuality away from multiplicity, as argued in Chapter Three. Kierkegaard believes that irony, like all forms of the comic, is polemical.¹⁵¹ Irony, then, is "exclusive" in a way that Jegstrup would probably find unfortunate.

Jegstrup and other Deconstructionists have a point when they are critical of some in the analytic tradition who think that everything, including, say, novels, can be reduced without remainder to a series of direct propositions. Kierkegaard would join Jegstrup in rebelling against this arrogating, direct, objective propositionalism in its attempts to

¹⁵⁰ NB5:147.a / JP 2, 1753.

¹⁵¹ *Pap.* III B 7 / JP 2, 1726.

subsume all of existence into itself. This does not mean, however, that the only alternative to accepting this analytic reduction is to accept logical contradictions, as Jegstrup does. Such a position grants too much to the objective philosophers, in fact, ceding them the realm of reason without a fight. Kierkegaard both endorsed irony and defended traditional reason, with its holding to the principle of contradiction. The use of irony, then, is not an excuse for sloppy or incoherent thinking. The requirement of existence demands the paring down, the exclusion of unhelpful options.¹⁵² To be reflexively “inclusive” of untold possibilities and options is not the pure benefit that it first seems to be. Just as it is no virtue for the physician to be inclusive of a debilitating illness, neither is it a philosophical virtue to be inclusive of error and nonsense.

Summary

Jegstrup desires to reject the exclusiveness of “logocentric” reason in favor of ironic playing with infinite possibilities. She is led necessarily to a position of incoherence since she wishes to exclude exclusiveness itself, including what she believes logocentrism to be. Despite some inconsistent notes that she does not wish to surrender to thoroughgoing relativism, it is hard to see how she can avoid it since methodologically she sets herself in opposition to any helpful criteria by which readings of a text might be limited. She defends her position by appealing to Kierkegaard’s irony, which she thinks explodes Western logocentrism and protects arbitrary and unexplained readings that crop up like wildflowers. Kierkegaard’s irony, however, does no such thing, and Jegstrup’s

¹⁵² “When a man has filled his mouth so full of food that for this reason he cannot eat and it must end with his dying of hunger, does giving food to him consist in stuffing his mouth even more or, instead, in taking a little away so that he can eat? Similarly, when a man is very knowledgeable but his knowledge is meaningless or virtually meaningless to him, does sensible communication consist in giving him more to know, even if he loudly proclaims that this is what he needs, or does it consist, instead, in taking something away from him?” (SKS 7, 251.1 / CUP 1, 275n).

defense of a “more inclusive” reason is, unbeknownst to her, much more amenable to Hegel’s thought instead. Rather than irony’s being a force to oppose Hegelianism, as Kierkegaard understands it to be, in Jegstrup’s hands irony is turned into something that is positively friendly towards Hegelianism.

Mark C. Taylor

Mark C. Taylor is a religious scholar whose early work was concerned with both Kierkegaard and Hegel. After his first book, *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self* (1975), Taylor wrote *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel & Kierkegaard* (1980). Around the time of the latter, Derrida was beginning to have an influence on his thinking. In 1975, Taylor seems to be aware of Kierkegaard’s critiques of Romantic irony and the dangers of German Romanticism,¹⁵³ but by the time of *Altarity* in 1987 Taylor is deeply influenced by deconstruction, and his Kierkegaard sounds more like he could be a devotee of Romantic (or deconstructive) unmastered irony.

Derrida: Between Kierkegaard and Hegel

In *Journeys to Selfhood*, Taylor notes that Kierkegaard is essentially a poet,¹⁵⁴ explicitly praising Mackey for his *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet*.¹⁵⁵ In a 1998 preface to his work, though, Taylor credits Hegel with opening the possibility to doing an aesthetic approach to philosophy:

In Hegel’s inclusive scheme, art, religion, and philosophy become different versions of the same truth..... Pride of place is, of course, given to philosophy....

¹⁵³ Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 175-77.

¹⁵⁴ Mark C. Taylor (2000), 93.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 93n57.

By rendering art and religion philosophically significant, Hegel creates the possibility of reversing the historical trajectory of his own thought by unwittingly suggesting that speculative philosophy could be refigured artistically and theologically. The pursuit of that possibility has implicitly or explicitly inspired the work of some of the twentieth century's leading artists, theologians, and philosophers.¹⁵⁶

In doing so, Taylor brings a new context to this discussion. While, starting with Mackey, many have taken the poetic Kierkegaard as if he were the initiate of the aesthetic's priority over (or even replacement of) philosophy, in Taylor's account the honor of this possibility goes to Hegel. In this narrative, Kierkegaard appears to be much closer to Hegel since he is essentially continuing the project that Hegel made possible rather than using aesthetic techniques to obliterate Hegelianism.

In fact, Taylor's fondness for both Hegel and Kierkegaard means that he is seeking a way to combine the insights of both, playing down their antagonism.¹⁵⁷ By the end of *Journeys to Selfhood*, Taylor shows his hand as favoring Hegel's answers over Kierkegaard's.¹⁵⁸ Nevertheless, he still admires Kierkegaard enough not to want to reject him completely but, rather, to look for "a position *between* Hegel and Kierkegaard—a point of view, in other words, that was *neither* Hegelian *nor* Kierkegaardian."¹⁵⁹ This position he found in Jacques Derrida, whose writings are "devoted to an exploration of

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., x.

¹⁵⁷ Speaking of Hegel and Kierkegaard's "shared presuppositions, assumptions, and intentions," Taylor notes that "the relationship between these two great dialecticians is itself thoroughly dialectical" (Ibid., 12).

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., xv. Exaggerating their positions into Hegelian unity vs. Kierkegaardian difference, Taylor ends his book saying, "Unity *within* plurality; being *within* becoming; constancy *within* change; peace *within* flux; identity *within* difference: the union of union and nonunion—reconciliation *in the midst of* estrangement. The end of the journey to selfhood" (Ibid., 276). Of course, the premature ending of struggling for selfhood in existence is precisely what Kierkegaard was opposing.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., xvi.

the territory I had defined as lying between Hegel and Kierkegaard.”¹⁶⁰ Derrida, in other words, becomes the mediating point through which Taylor comes to receive both Hegel and Kierkegaard.

Altarity

One sees Taylor’s Derridean and deconstructionist Kierkegaard in the final chapter of his *Altarity*. He arranges his work by considering an assortment of writers with ties to postmodernism, framing it by placing Hegel at the front and Kierkegaard at the end. Taylor explains, “In between I suspend thinkers of difference who are neither precisely Hegelian nor Kierkegaardian. By giving Kierkegaard the last word, I signal the general trajectory of much of the most creative philosophy and criticism developed during the last half of the twentieth century.”¹⁶¹ The presentation of Kierkegaard that Taylor gives in his chapter, “Transgression: Søren Kierkegaard” is extremely deconstructionist. He gives the impression that Kierkegaard is a proponent of unbridled play, in rebellion against his much-too-serious Copenhagen,¹⁶² and Taylor mirrors that unbridled play in his treatment of Kierkegaard. For example, under the section heading, “Doodling,” Taylor devotes pages to considering small drawings and doodles that Kierkegaard had written on the margins of his work, such as a small flower, a man looking through a spyglass, and some hash marks.¹⁶³ He treats them as if Kierkegaard

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., xvii-xviii.

¹⁶² In Copenhagen, “[u]seless expenditures are not allowed; messing up and fooling around are strictly forbidden. Play is permitted only if it makes sense, and it makes sense only when it is in the service of work” (Mark C. Taylor, *Altarity* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987], 306-7).

¹⁶³ Ibid., 308-15.

might be deliberately making deconstructionist statements through these doodles. For example, for a drawing of a simple set of stairs Taylor comments, “Seemingly Borgesian stairs that come from and lead nowhere,”¹⁶⁴ and for a few sketches of a man’s face in profile he says:

It is a face—the face of a man. The face is never open to full view but is always diverted, forever looking elsewhere. The direction is always the same: from the right to the left—backward. In all of Kierkegaard’s manuscripts, there is not a single profile facing forward, i.e., from left to right. It is as if these men or the many faces of this one man were gazing back toward the past, toward an absolute or impossible past, a past that is always already past, a past that might never have been present.¹⁶⁵

One marvels at such commentary. Taylor’s wordplay is free-flowing, as when he quips that an epigram is “less a thesis than a prosthesis”¹⁶⁶ or speaks of the “k/night of faith.”¹⁶⁷ Taylor feels extremely free about drawing poorly or even unsubstantiated conclusions from Kierkegaard’s texts.

He is so free in their handling, in fact, that Roger Poole, despite the commonality between his position and Taylor’s, expresses annoyance with Taylor’s unaccountable method. Poole says that, since Taylor’s Derridean method believes that it is impossible to establish a determinate meaning, one is liberated to “play fast and loose with the Kierkegaardian text and make it mean anything that the fantast wishes to make it say.”¹⁶⁸ Poole illustrates this using one passage from Taylor’s *Altarity* where, absurdly, the logic of Taylor’s argument depends on the similar sound between the Danish word for mother

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 310.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 313.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 325.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 349.

¹⁶⁸ Poole (1998), 67.

(*Mor*) and the English word “more.”¹⁶⁹ Taylor feels perfectly free to make such an argument, unhindered by the facts that there is no etymological connection between the Danish and English words and that Kierkegaard never learned English. His reading has such little respect for the text and is so whipsawing in its reckless games that Poole calls *Altarity*, “a huge nihilistic tapestry,”¹⁷⁰ applying to Taylor the charge of nihilism that Deconstructionists, including Poole, typically defend themselves against.

For all of his ironic playfulness and attitude of unaccountable levity, Taylor’s analysis is granted no particular insight into Kierkegaard’s understanding of the comic. In fact, it is particularly obtuse. For example, Taylor considers forms of silence in Kierkegaard, saying, “The simplest form of silence is comic. Kierkegaard does not discuss comic silence in much detail, for he takes it to be commonplace and rather trivial.”¹⁷¹ That Taylor could suggest that Kierkegaard considers any function or quality of the comic to be “commonplace” or “rather trivial” speaks to a radical misreading not just of any particular text of Kierkegaard’s but of a great series of them, including pseudonymous works, signed works, and journal entries spanning his entire authorship. Kierkegaard believed that those of his day had misunderstood the comic just as drastically as they had misunderstood faith, philosophy, existence, and a host of other topics, and he was just as concerned by this misunderstanding as the others, for similar

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 68. Taylor writes, “The silence of [Kierkegaard’s] mother repeatedly interrupts the *é-criture* of the son with the incessant *cri*: ‘*Mor, Mor, Mor!*’ To hear the echoes of this cry, it is important to note that ‘*Mor*,’ the Danish word for mother, sounds much like the English word ‘more.’ The child’s cry for ‘*Mor*’ is the cry for an impossible ‘more.’ Neither the mother nor any of her substitutes can ever still this cry. The endless cry of ‘*Mor*’ bespeaks a certain absence” (Mark C. Taylor [1987], 156).

¹⁷⁰ Poole (1998), 68.

¹⁷¹ Mark C. Taylor (1987), 336. Taylor’s comment also suggests a problem with his own reasoning. He is examining types of silence presumably because it has something to say about Kierkegaard’s deconstructive opinions on the failures of language and the unnameability of existence, etc., but then he takes Kierkegaard’s presumed silence at this point as an indication that Kierkegaard considered the topic to be trivial.

reasons. Taylor continues, saying that each of the forms of silence he considers, including comic silence, “is a binary opposite of speech.”¹⁷² This is quite mistaken. Precisely because the comic and its forms constitute types of indirect communication, they count as *communication*. For example, a humorist, though he is talking about a man desperate to arrive at his destination while riding a horse that can barely walk, may well be indirectly communicating something about the nature of human existence and its composition of both the infinite and the finite.¹⁷³ Taylor specifically mentions “mistaken identity” as an example of the trivial comic silence,¹⁷⁴ but *Prefaces* uses the example of such a kind of mistake to communicate indirectly about the death of the unrivalled reign of philosophy!¹⁷⁵ In Kierkegaard’s understanding, the comic is neither “silence” nor trivial as Taylor would have it.

Derrida and the Hegelianization of Kierkegaard

Despite Taylor’s confessed interest in Kierkegaard, including launching a series of books in the 1980’s entitled *Kierkegaard & Post-Modernism*,¹⁷⁶ he always comes back

¹⁷² Ibid., 339.

¹⁷³ SKS 7, 283-84 / CUP 1, 311.

¹⁷⁴ Mark C. Taylor (1987), 336.

¹⁷⁵ SKS 4, 513 / P, 52-53. See P, 183n150.

¹⁷⁶ In addition to Mackey’s *Points of View*, another notable contribution to this book series is Sylviane Agacinski’s *Aparté*. Agacinski is another scholar who reads Kierkegaard “through the crucible of Jacques Derrida’s philosophico-linguistic project of deconstruction” (Sylviane Agacinski, *Aparté: Conceptions and Deaths of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans., Kevin Newmark [Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1988], 10). In a similar way to the other Deconstructionists, she focuses on Kierkegaard’s early writings (in this case *The Concept of Irony*), tries to make use of irony even as she discusses irony (Ibid., 15), assumes that irony is a lack of earnestness (Ibid., 15-16), believes that Kierkegaard’s entire authorship is an “elaborate extension” of irony (Ibid., 17), and thinks that ironic structures are devoid of meaning and undo all meaningful contexts (Ibid., 27, 30). In direct contrast to Kierkegaard’s view of irony as cultivating subjectivity, Agacinski says that irony is “a withdrawal of the subject, indeed a void” (Ibid., 33. Newmark interprets her as saying that irony is “not primarily subjective; if anything, it is more like the death of the subject” [Ibid., 19]). Like other Deconstructionists drawing on Kierkegaard’s dissertation, she has to handle the points that run contrary to her thesis very carefully.

to Hegel. He favored Hegel in the conclusion to *Journeys to Selfhood*, and though he gave the “last word” to Kierkegaard in *Altarity*, he comes back again to saying, “While a general drift toward a quasi-Kierkegaardianism has characterized the past three decades, it is now time to reverse directions and reconsider Hegel.”¹⁷⁷ Poole says that after 1975 Taylor “fell more profoundly under the influence of Hegel than he had previously been under that of the Danish master,” adding that Taylor’s *Journeys to Selfhood* “inaugurates a period of Hegelianization of the Kierkegaardian texts that has become both widespread and fashionable in his wake.”¹⁷⁸

Indeed, Taylor’s interest in Derrida’s deconstruction is evidence for, not against, his favoring of Hegel over Kierkegaard. To see this, observe Taylor’s insightful comment: “Furthermore, I eventually realized a contradiction in my decision for Hegel and against Kierkegaard. To pose the choice *either* Hegel *or* Kierkegaard is to side with Kierkegaard even when choosing Hegel.”¹⁷⁹ To argue for a strong difference between Hegel and Kierkegaard is to concede Kierkegaard’s insistence upon a dialectic of distinction against Hegel’s mediation that confesses fundamental unity, so even to try to decide against Kierkegaard is to concede his account against Hegel’s. Thus, Taylor is led

Consequently, she says that Kierkegaard’s seemingly earnest theses on irony are, after he satisfies the institutional requirement to defend his work, set free to “nonearnestness” and that he no longer vouches for their earnestness (Ibid., 74, 76). Thus, she feels at liberty to rewrite Kierkegaard’s theses, presumably making them say what she thought he should have said. Her final rewritten thesis shows irony’s ambiguous relationship to earnestness: “A thesis can always be haunted by irony” (Ibid., 78)]. Again, because Kierkegaard says that it is “doctrinaire,” Agacinski has to downplay *Lucinde*’s ironic character (Ibid., 66), and because Kierkegaard refers to the seducing Romantic ironist as a “vampire” she has to argue that such a description is not intended to be denigrating (Ibid., 51). Generally speaking, deconstructionist readings of Kierkegaard are excellent studies in the kinds of contortions that one must engage in in order to read against the text.

¹⁷⁷ Mark C. Taylor (2000), xviii.

¹⁷⁸ Poole (1998), 68.

¹⁷⁹ Mark C. Taylor (2000), xvi.

to seek a position “*between* Hegel and Kierkegaard,” emphasizing their commonality and acknowledging the service that both provide to philosophy.¹⁸⁰ While this solution seems irenic, it is not. In fact, following his own logic, it decides in favor of Hegel. If to force a choice between *either* Hegel *or* Kierkegaard is to side with Kierkegaard, then to accommodate both positions in a way that shows how they can work together in a fundamental unity is to side with Hegel. Thus, Taylor seeks a “Hegelianization” of Kierkegaard, to use Poole’s words, that pays Kierkegaard the compliment of making a few good points while, in fact, fundamentally undermining Kierkegaard’s project in favor of Hegel’s final answers and method. It is Derrida who shows Taylor how to do this, so his interest in Derrida and deconstruction is a reflection of Taylor’s favoring Hegel over Kierkegaard. Even though it is suggested that Derrida is closer to Kierkegaard than to Hegel,¹⁸¹ for example in his favoring *différance* over system, Taylor is more expressive about Derrida’s “preoccupation with Hegel.”¹⁸² He quotes Derrida as saying, “We will never be finished with the reading or the rereading of Hegel, and, in a certain way, I do nothing other than attempt to explain myself on this point.”¹⁸³ Taylor says, “Derrida has always accepted the inescapability of Hegel,” because Derrida recognized, as did Kierkegaard, that to oppose Hegel directly is to fall under his sway,¹⁸⁴ therefore Taylor understands Derrida to be exploring space between the two thinkers which, as just noted, works ultimately in Hegel’s favor.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid., xii.

¹⁸³ Ibid., xi.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., xiii.

As an illustration that the tie between Hegel and deconstruction might be stronger than it first appears, consider the following quotation from Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

“[A]ll the great philosophical ideas of the past century—the philosophies of Marx and Nietzsche, phenomenology, German existentialism, and psychoanalysis—had their beginnings in Hegel; it was he who started the attempt to explore the irrational and integrate it into an expanded reason, which remains the task of this century.”¹⁸⁵ The desire of the deconstructionist Jegstrup is precisely to see this “expanded reason,” though she thinks that Kierkegaard will aid her to attain this desire, not realizing how much of her interests are undergirded by Hegelian assumptions. By making philosophy the chief instantiation of other forms of human enterprise, Hegel opened the possibility of incorporating the irrational into reason. Kierkegaard, though, rejects this, defending Aristotle’s classic principle of contradiction and seeing the irrational (whether in the form of the paradox, the absurd, etc.) as a *limit* to reason. Kierkegaard has a strong anthropological humility that Hegelianism lacks. The former believes that humans have limits, including those of our reasoning abilities, but, on this reading, Hegelianism presumes that we can incorporate ever more, even the irrational, into our systems of philosophical reason. In this context, Jegstrup’s appeal for “inclusive” reason now sounds as if there is more about it that is arrogating or even avaricious than does at first glance. It is an account of reason that bristles in offense at ever being told, “No.” Kierkegaard, though, believes that the possibility for this offense is also the possibility for faith.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., xii.

¹⁸⁶ SKS 4, 254-57 / PF, 49-54.

Taylor sees more deeply than Mackey, Poole, or Jegstrup that deconstruction has a natural affinity with Hegel, despite its critiques of him. The arguments that Kierkegaard laid the groundwork for the coming of deconstruction a century before are mostly forced reconstructions of Kierkegaard by scholars already influenced by the deconstruction project. For example, Taylor rejects the idea that Derrida derived deconstruction from Kierkegaard, saying, “to the contrary, until quite recently, Derrida has virtually ignored Kierkegaard’s writings.”¹⁸⁷ While Kierkegaard is referenced in a myriad of places in deconstructive writing, he has been, perhaps surprisingly, rarely studied at length in it.

Summary

Whatever interest Taylor may have had in Kierkegaard early in his career, his later work is more interested in using Derrida and deconstruction to accommodate Kierkegaard into a more Hegel-friendly form. He uses Kierkegaard’s interest in irony as an excuse to unleash his own unaccountable ironic play, reading the Dane without feeling beholden to reflect carefully on Kierkegaard’s corpus, preferring to put more trust in his own imaginative construal of a scribble in the margins than in Kierkegaard’s careful explanations of his own project. It could hardly be a crime, though, if there is no determinative meaning to a text. Taylor’s readings are so outlandish that even fellow Deconstructionist Roger Poole is driven to gripe at his disrespect for Kierkegaard’s texts,

¹⁸⁷ Mark C. Taylor (2000), xiv. Taylor’s “until quite recently” is a reference to Derrida’s *The Gift of Death* (1992).

accusing Taylor of “Beckettian nihilism”¹⁸⁸ in his “A/theology” that owes so much to Hegel.¹⁸⁹

Conclusion

Of the many problems with Deconstructionist readings of Kierkegaard,¹⁹⁰ their conception of what constitutes “irony” for Kierkegaard is among the most central. This is because they believe irony to be at the heart of Kierkegaard’s project, often managing to find it in just about any place in his corpus that they care to look for it. If Kierkegaard is a thoroughly ironic writer, they reason, then he cannot be a writer in earnest. Whatever philosophical and theological readers of Kierkegaard believe that they are finding in him—indeed, whatever deconstructionist readers of Kierkegaard find in him that has a *prima facie* appearance of earnestness—cannot be trusted, for at any moment it may be revealed to be just another example of irony from the master ironist.

Mackey started this contemporary trend not in full-blown deconstructive thought but by wanting to emphasize a “literary” reading of Kierkegaard in which Kierkegaard’s

¹⁸⁸ Poole (1998), 69.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 68.

¹⁹⁰ I do not wish to give the impression that there is nothing whatever of value in the deconstructionist readings of Kierkegaard, though I do believe that the more consistent deconstructionist readings become to their own stated views and assumptions the greater the perversity of their readings. One of the deconstructionist readings of Kierkegaard that has the most to say helpfully is Michael Strawser’s *Both/And: Reading Kierkegaard from Irony to Edification*. Strawser contains many of the same problems as his cohorts: he downplays the importance of Christianity to Kierkegaard’s project, he makes peculiar choices about which of Kierkegaard’s texts to foreground, and he distorts the nature and extent of Kierkegaard’s irony (“For Kierkegaard, who referred to himself as a ‘Magister of Irony’ to the very end, the significance of irony can hardly be overstated” [Strawser, xvi]). Nevertheless, even when he goes astray, his thinking appears to be more careful and to stay closer to what Kierkegaard is actually doing than the conclusions of many of his Deconstructionist colleagues. For example, he refuses to reject the idea that Kierkegaard is a philosopher who must be approached philosophically, he rejects the idea that irony should be treated solely as a matter of aesthetics, recognizing its importance for ethics and life’s existential task in Kierkegaard’s writings, and, as his title implies, he believes that Kierkegaard’s irony has some important relation to Kierkegaard’s interest in edification, even if he does not yet recognize how irony itself can exhibit the earnestness of edification.

irony, among other things, was to be brought to a new appreciation. The idea that a theory of aesthetics could stand on its own, independent of (or relatively independent of) philosophy and theology, led naturally, through the failures and unrecognized assumptions of this position, towards deconstruction. In fact, some later deconstructionists, for all of their appreciation of Mackey, appear to believe his early work on Kierkegaard to be weak tea in comparison with their more hardened deconstructive readings.¹⁹¹ Mackey has provided a service to Kierkegaard scholarship by drawing new attention to the important literary dimension of a writer who is, undoubtedly, an artistic genius, but his desire to separate an “aesthetic” reading of Kierkegaard from “philosophical” and “theological” ones is an artificial distinction with an unfortunate legacy. Irony, prominently, was one of the casualties. This casualty led to others since the association of irony with poetry and aesthetic elements, against the earnestness of philosophy and theology, led to the misconstrual of large portions of Kierkegaard’s corpus under the banner of this faulty category. In the hands of Deconstructionists, irony strangely became both exaggerated and underemphasized: exaggerated in its extent in the corpus, association with doubt, and centrality to Kierkegaard’s project, and underemphasized in regards to its importance for earnest ethical development, cultivation and protection of subjectivity, and ties to other important Kierkegaardian terms such as “humor,” “the comic,” “jest,” and “earnestness.” Instead, finding irony became the excuse for ignoring Kierkegaard’s ostensibly earnest comments

¹⁹¹ For example, Newmark is grateful for Mackey’s initiative but also criticizes *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* for having “a certain lack of rigor” that “served to contain or offset some of the more radical effects of Kierkegaard’s ‘indirect communication’” (Agacinski, 6-7).

on ethics, religion, philosophy, aesthetics, and even irony itself.¹⁹² Indeed, logical coherence can even be sacrificed in the name of the infinite possibilities of irony's playfulness.

Additionally, the Deconstructionist version of Kierkegaard's irony creates problems for understanding Kierkegaard's philosophical genealogy. In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard shows signs of being closer to Hegel's philosophy than he would be later in life, which is why Kierkegaard can look back on his dissertation and criticize himself for being a "Hegelian fool."¹⁹³ If, however, Kierkegaard's later self-evaluation is ignored and *The Concept of Irony* is only taken to be Kierkegaard's *ironic* endorsement of some Hegelian positions in order to subvert them from within, then this tradition of reading Kierkegaard will seriously underestimate the positive contributions that Hegel made to Kierkegaard's thinking, and the difficulty of establishing Kierkegaard's dialectical relationship to Hegel, including both disdain and admiration, will be ignored for the simplicity of total rejection from the very beginning. This also has the effect of making Kierkegaard appear to be a direct follower of German Romanticism, rather than a powerful critic at many points. One can imagine that if Kierkegaard himself were able to respond to the description of him as being a friend and associate of the German

¹⁹² The favorite tactic of the Deconstructionists, to say that Kierkegaard's speaking of irony is itself irony, frees them from any chastening instruction that the Master of Irony might have to say to them on the nature of irony itself. *The Concept of Irony* is a beloved source for their inquiries into irony, and revoking its less appealing cautions as being just another example of Kierkegaard's rampant irony protects them from it at the same time. Strawser, for instance, says, "[T]he initial point of view for the study of Kierkegaard's work as a writer, the study of his *Livsanskuelse*, is found in the rich text *The Concept of Irony*.... One has little doubt, then, that the dissertation... is itself ironic, and that the author, the being-for-itself subject, is an ironist who, with his fifteen theses on irony in hand at one moment and out the window the next, is actually just playing with nothing or nothingness" (Strawser, 28, 30-31).

¹⁹³ NB21:35 / JP 4, 4281.

Romantics, owing to his use of irony, that he would probably liken it to Socrates being characterized as the chief of the Sophists.

Although the line from many of the Deconstructionists is that Kierkegaard was a complete critic of Hegel from the start, their way of receiving his irony is able, in fact, to play right into Hegelian hands. Whether it is in a weaker form of distancing irony from philosophical content or a stronger form of using irony as evidence for the negation of subjectivity,¹⁹⁴ Deconstructionist readings of Kierkegaard's irony tend either to downplay or to eliminate its relevance for subjectivity, which is exactly what Kierkegaard believes to be so important about it. Irony's preservation of the strong distinction between inner and outer is one of its most powerful defenses against Hegelian mediation.¹⁹⁵ To empty irony of its "inner" eliminates subjectivity and the contradiction with the external, making it easily assimilable to the ever-advancing objective system.

Even just to reduce irony to an aesthetic element would not be satisfactory. In fact, Kierkegaard associates irony so closely with existence, subjectivity, and ethical development, that, if forced to make the choice, he would not classify irony primarily as a category of "the literary" or "aesthetics" at all. Climacus says, "Irony is an existence-qualification, and thus nothing is more ludicrous than regarding it as a style of

¹⁹⁴ Agacinski says that irony is a subjective void, sweeping away the ironist himself (Agacinski, 33).

¹⁹⁵ Climacus describes irony as joining together such "absolutely different" elements as ethical passion and culture. Ethical passion "in inwardness infinitely accentuates one's own *I* in relation to the ethical requirement," while culture "in externality infinitely abstracts from the personal *I* as a finitude included among all other finitudes and particulars" (*SKS* 7, 456 / *CUP* 1, 503). To eliminate subjectivity and de-emphasize the *I* is to eliminate irony, leaving only the externality of "culture" remaining. And, of course, *Sittlichkeit* is a Hegelian specialty.

speaking.... The person who has essential irony has it all day long and is not bound to any style, because it is the infinite within him.”¹⁹⁶

Although this chapter is not interested in Derrida’s view of irony *per se* but in the reception of Kierkegaard’s irony by those who have been influenced by Derrida’s deconstructive project, it is worth noting that John Caputo, an accomplished scholar of both Derrida and Kierkegaard, sees important differences between the conception of irony in the two thinkers. Intuitively, Caputo is able to sense the earnestness and committed norms that lie behind Kierkegaard’s use of irony: in Kierkegaard “[t]he existence of a sacred name, the name of Jesus, and of a sacred scripture, the text of the New Testament, of a divine Word and of sacred words, give irony a bearing, orientation, and directedness in the authorship that it simply lacks in the Derridean corpus, where irony is a little more lost....”¹⁹⁷ He adds:

For the Christian Socrates [viz., Kierkegaard], irony and humor are strategies and incognitos, whereas for a more deconstructive Socrates irony is not a strategy but an inescapable condition, what Derrida calls a “necessity” (ON, 125-26) that undermines first-order distinctions between irony and direct communication, humor and seriousness, with the result that everything is submitted to a more deep-set, bottomless, second-order irony.¹⁹⁸

This only makes sense, since “an incognito implies a *cognitum*,”¹⁹⁹ and Kierkegaard, whom he notes authored the “edifying discourses,” “does not lack a determinate idea of

¹⁹⁶ *SKS* 7, 457 / *CUP* 1, 503-4.

¹⁹⁷ John D. Caputo, “Either—Or, Undecidability, and Two Concepts of Irony: Kierkegaard and Derrida,” in *The New Kierkegaard*, ed., Elsebet Jegstrup (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 25.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

what a Christian would be.”²⁰⁰ In other words, Caputo makes clear that amidst all of this (to some degree, perfectly correct) emphasis on Kierkegaard’s focus on the *how* over the *what*, Kierkegaard himself does not lack a *what*, but Derrida does.²⁰¹ Thus, when the Deconstructionists see Kierkegaard as lacking content, position, selfhood, faith, or any other *what* in favor of a *how*, they are reading not Kierkegaard but Derrida, wishing that the Dane were more of a Deconstructionist than he really is. When they see Kierkegaard using irony, they mistake it for Derrida’s, with unsurprising results.²⁰²

It is true that Kierkegaard recognized irony’s power to be “deconstructive” and critical, but this is not because irony is contentless or unpositioned²⁰³ but because it is *polemical*, which means that it attacks a position from another position in existence, whether this is recognized by observers or not. In fact, the accentuation of ethical passion makes its critique stronger, far more than would a waffling or maundering so-called irony that dissolves not just the enemy but the self. In any case, why does one fight if there is nothing for which to fight? Using irony as the excuse for opening up a

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 28.

²⁰¹ For Kierkegaard, “The *what* is sitting there, all the while, patiently waiting for us if we could ever muster the courage of the *how*.” However, “for Derrida there never was a *what*.” (Ibid., 28-29).

²⁰² Caputo is similarly perceptive regarding Kierkegaard’s use of pseudonyms. Deconstructionists and the “literarily” interested often point to Kierkegaard’s use of pseudonyms as evidence of his indeterminacy, multiplicity of perspective, questioning of identity, ironic lack of earnestness regarding what he is saying, etc. (E.g., Jegstrup, 10). Caputo sees, though, that there is no need to hide behind a pseudonym if there is nothing veronymous behind it, which is why Derrida makes limited use of pseudonyms (Caputo, 29).

²⁰³ If it were so that irony was truly without content or position, it would be strikingly excluded from another common postmodern claim that all knowing is perspectival. Indeed, the belief that irony is inexplicably not positioned in any way and not reflective of the subjective commitments and biases of the ironist merely repeats the mistake that modernism and the Enlightenment made with reason, making it the disembodied, quasi-divine, objective arbiter. In other words, despite any protests to the contrary, Deconstructionists are in danger of welcoming a new Hegel with a new system, this time a completely godless one that uses irony rather than reason as the principle engine of its worldview. If deconstruction wants to be suspicious of systems and totalizing views, it should turn its critical aim upon that incipient danger rather than repeating the mistakes of Enlightenment under a new banner.

multiplicity of readings does not explosively interrupt any serious reading of the immediate text.²⁰⁴ Rather, it offers up countless ways to allow one's "irony" and one's project to be hijacked and appropriated by the next headstrong philosophy to enter the room and determine the most suitable reading. The wildflowers of this feckless multiplicity are just fodder for the next logocentrism. By not knowing or confessing that irony has a rootedness in some earnestness, they will describe and praise irony as something it is not. Led by their own misrepresentations, they will only descend into future error, not understanding the properties of the sword they wield, until they are conscripted to lend that sword to a battle they did not choose or understand. If Hegel can co-opt the strong, he can certainly co-opt the weak.

Irony, for Kierkegaard, is the means of cultivating a self in existence, not the means of expressing doubt or agnosticism about selfhood and identity. Kierkegaard's discussions of irony should be understood in this light. For example, when Kierkegaard expresses skepticism about the sufficiency of direct communication, this is not a reason to doubt the efficacy of selfhood but, to the contrary, evidence of the existence of an incommensurable self. Also, when Kierkegaard expresses skepticism about the adequacy of the philosophical system, this is not an expression that "the center cannot hold" or despair because meaning is dead but a confession of the importance and reality of human existence that abstraction cannot attain or master. Again, when Kierkegaard speaks of the absurd and the paradox, it is not a lament for the arbitrariness and instability of existence but a word of gratitude that there is a God who is higher than our understanding. Kierkegaard's irony is an expression of his faith, not his doubt. When

²⁰⁴ Jegstrup, 73.

one comes across Kierkegaard's use of irony, then, one should not immediately suspect that earnestness is excluded. Only assistant professors think that.

The Deconstructionists are advised, then, if they truly have interest in being faithful to what Kierkegaard said, to extend their interest in irony beyond irony alone to include other concepts such as humor, the comic, jest, and earnestness. This will also have the happy result of expanding their *de facto* canon of Kierkegaard's writings beyond an undue favoritism for his earliest works (especially *The Concept of Irony*, *Either/Or*, and perhaps *Repetition*) in order to venture into the rest of his corpus, including the oft-ignored upbuilding discourses and the dreaded late polemical works against Christendom. This will perhaps help to chasten the tendentious reading that names Kierkegaard as proto-Derrida and help to draw out Kierkegaard in better-rounded fullness. I offer this assurance if any take up this task in good faith: any reverence and admiration for the genius of Kierkegaard and how well he was able to see into the future will only increase. For there is some truth to the Deconstructionist claim that Kierkegaard saw their day, anticipating many of their own positions and arguments. What is more, though, and what remains for them to discover, is that Kierkegaard saw past them as well. A century before Deconstruction would arrive, Kierkegaard was not only already the first postmodern, he was also already the first post-Deconstructionist.

CHAPTER FIVE

Theology and Kierkegaard's Conception of the Comic

Although most commonly thought of as a philosopher, Kierkegaard continues to be read as a religious thinker with theological insights to lend.¹ This is for good reason since even his putatively philosophical insights, such as those into the nature of human subjectivity, time, social identity, belief, etc., are rooted in religious concerns and turn on theological positions. For example, while Kierkegaard has much to say about the single individual in contrast to the social bourgeois mindset, his reflections are not limited exclusively to the realm of political theory since they derive from and implicate his concerns for personally appropriated Christian belief in a culture where Christendom has, he believes, obscured traditional Christian categories.

Kierkegaard's insights into the comic pertain to his insights about the theology as well, and this has been insufficiently recognized by contemporary scholars who read Kierkegaard theologically. While the instincts and conclusions of those who read Kierkegaard theologically are generally to be preferred to Kierkegaard's readers from the Deconstructionist tradition, the former lack the latter's awareness of Kierkegaard's use of the comic as well as their willingness to let such use influence their conclusions about his thought. Here, I will examine two contemporary scholarly works that evidence a theological interest in Kierkegaard, Murray Rae's *Kierkegaard and Theology* and W.

¹ As Gouwens puts it, "By 'religious thinker' I mean that [Kierkegaard's] thought is *about* religion and at the same time is itself religious" (David J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 3. This is the very distinction I am getting at by distinguishing between "theology" and "religion" here.

Glenn Kirkconnell's *Kierkegaard on Sin and Salvation*, and will argue that, although these readings of Kierkegaard are worthy in many respects, the already strong arguments could be strengthened further with the additional consideration of Kierkegaard's conception of the comic.

Murray Rae

In *Kierkegaard and Theology*, Murray Rae evidences a wise restraint in his attempt to examine Kierkegaard theologically. While some might be tempted to mine Kierkegaard for his theological insights in order to use them to fashion the systematic theology that Kierkegaard never wrote, Rae refuses to engage in such a task, noting, "Kierkegaard's overriding interest in what it means *to be* a Christian means that we do not find in him anything remotely resembling a systematic presentation of Christian doctrine."² Rae does not seek to "improve" Kierkegaard, given this omission. Rather he presents Kierkegaard's theological insights topically, making clear that what Kierkegaard offers the Christian tradition is not another systematic theology but a theological "corrective" to how the Christian message was being appropriated in his day.³ For Rae, Kierkegaard's theology is largely that of traditional Lutheranism,⁴ but what makes

² Murray Rae, *Kierkegaard and Theology* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 3.

³ Ibid., 166-68.

⁴ I agree with Rae's assessment that Kierkegaard's theology is very traditional, noting that "Kierkegaard has little argument with the standard doctrinal presentations of Christian faith" (Ibid., 3). Generally speaking, Kierkegaard's objection to his fellow Danes who claimed to be Christian was not at the level of the doctrine of the faith but at the level of their appropriating it into their lives with integrity: "The doctrine in the established Church and its organization are very good. But the lives, our lives—believe me, they are mediocre" (NB23:33 / JP 6, 6727). Cf. FF:147 / JP 1, 583; NB20:169 / JP3, 3684. Gouwens believes Kierkegaard to be generally orthodox (Gouwens, 8-9), and Ferreira reads *Works of Love* under the assumption that Kierkegaard theologically agrees with Luther "except for those places where he specifically notes otherwise" (M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], 19).

Kierkegaard noteworthy is his “prophetic voice” in calling for a more faithful and honest discipleship.⁵ Consequently, because he knows his task well, Rae tends to make good judgments in his presentation of Kierkegaard’s relation to theology. For example, when speaking about forgiveness in relation to *The Sickness Unto Death* and its pseudonym, Rae rightly says, “Anti-Climacus is not much interested in the ‘mechanism’ by which forgiveness of sin takes place. He does not enter into discussion, for instance, about the metaphors of atonement presented in the Bible. He *is* interested, however, in the declaration of forgiveness presented to the individual.”⁶

Despite his insight into the topic of Kierkegaard and theology here, though, Rae shows absolutely no interest in Kierkegaard’s understanding or use of the comic. *Kierkegaard and Theology* never mentions “comic” or “humor,” and rarely mentions “irony,” having only a single reference to irony outside of allusions to the title of Kierkegaard’s dissertation.⁷ One might justly ask, “Why should Rae address the comic? He is writing a book about theology, after all, and cannot be expected to cover everything addressed by Kierkegaard.” It is true that choices must be made when writing a book, but the assumption that Kierkegaard’s theology can be discussed in clean separation from Kierkegaard’s conception of the comic without loss is the very assumption that this dissertation is challenging. Consider Rae’s words: “This book does not offer an introduction to all that the Danish author Søren Kierkegaard has to say, much less to all that his scholarly readers would have him say. It is directed rather to those who want to

⁵ Rae, 167-68.

⁶ Ibid., 98-99.

⁷ Ibid., 172. This mention occurs in the context of considering Hamann, to be examined below.

understand something of Kierkegaard's theology."⁸ Understanding Kierkegaard on the comic, however, is integral to understanding that theology. Especially since Rae rightly notes that Kierkegaard's theological interest is not in debating objective doctrinal formulations but in how they get appropriated in people's lives which then must be lived out, Kierkegaard's treatment of the comic is noticeably absent since it is in the language of the comic that Kierkegaard speaks of how to live religiously in the world and under God.

1) Kierkegaard and Hamann

I will give two examples of places within Rae's work that could be strengthened with greater attention to the comic. First, consider his treatment of Kierkegaard's relation to J. G. Hamann. Rae's final chapter seeks to locate Kierkegaard within the tradition of Christian theology, and in the context of Lutheranism's influence on Kierkegaard he considers Hamann, whom he thinks is one of the most important channels of Luther's thought to Kierkegaard.⁹ While Hamann is not given extensive treatment, his mention is important for Rae in securing Lutheranism's influence on Kierkegaard. For example, Rae notes Lowrie's extremely high estimation of Hamann's influence on Kierkegaard.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid., 1.

⁹ Ibid., 172. Rae is not alone in thinking this. For example, Kirkconnell, considered below, agrees that Hamann is one of the most important points of contact between Luther's thought and Kierkegaard's (W. Glenn Kirkconnell, *Kierkegaard on Ethics and Religion: From Either/Or to Philosophical Fragments* [New York: Continuum, 2008], 91).

¹⁰ "I am inclined to say that [Hamann] is the only author by whom S.K. was profoundly influenced" (Walter Lowrie, *Kierkegaard* [London: Oxford University Press, 1938], 164). Betz notes that Kierkegaard praises Hamann more highly than he does any other modern author (John R. Betz, *After Enlightenment: The Post-Secular Vision of J. G. Hamann* [Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009], 14).

What is specifically important to note here is Kierkegaard's extremely high estimation of Hamann as a humorist. Kierkegaard says in one early journal entry, "Hamann is the greatest humorist in Christianity," and since he believes that Christianity is the most humorous life-view in world history, Kierkegaard adds that Hamann is "therefore the greatest humorist in the world" (DD:3 / JP 2, 1681).

Of this influence upon Kierkegaard, Rae says, “Hamann was also a great admirer of Socrates and employed the methods of indirect communication, maieutic teaching, and irony, all of which were taken up by Kierkegaard. It seems plausible too that Hamann was for Kierkegaard the key tradent of Luther’s thought prior to 1847.”¹¹ Irony is here mentioned, without comment, but it is characterized as something in Hamann that influenced Kierkegaard *in addition* to Luther’s thought. Irony is acknowledged, then, but not as something integrally related to Hamann’s theological influence. For Rae’s theological interests, he thinks irony needs no further consideration.

In this, however, Rae is mistaken. To begin with, his characterization of Kierkegaard’s influence from Hamann is imprecise since he highlights “irony.” To some degree this is understandable, since Hamann undoubtedly does have frequent recourse to irony. In Kierkegaard’s schema, however, Hamann is associated not with irony but with humor,¹² and these categories are sufficiently different that they should not be conflated in Kierkegaard. By mentioning Hamann’s influence in irony but not humor, it is further obscured that Hamann’s comic influence on Kierkegaard is integral to his theological influence on Kierkegaard because humor is the existential form of the comic that borders on the religious. Hamann’s defense of Christianity is a humorous one, and his polemically adversarial stance towards the philosophy of his day was something that Kierkegaard sympathized with very deeply, bringing Kierkegaard to associate Hamann’s

¹¹ Rae, 172.

¹² E.g., DD: 36 / JP 2, 1699; *Pap.* V B 44 / JP 2, 1554.

sharp humor with his Christian faith.¹³ This, however, must go unacknowledged by Rae, for whom Hamann's comic influence is not seriously considered in relation to theology.

Additionally, an important opportunity is missed in Rae's consideration of the influence of Luther's theology on Kierkegaard. Rae boils Luther's influence down to two themes: the lowliness of Christ and the priority of grace.¹⁴ Specifically, the "lowliness of Christ" theme in Kierkegaard has Hamann's fingerprints all over it. Hamann identified strongly with the humility of Christ's incarnation and life and, accordingly, fought his *Aufklärer* philosophical opponents from below, so to speak. While they wrote scientific systems, he wrote essays in an aphoristic style.¹⁵ While they cited Socrates' willingness to question authority, Hamann described a Socrates who knew enough to recognize his own ignorance and was humble enough to take instruction from his daemon.¹⁶ While

¹³ Betz says succinctly that in Hamann Kierkegaard would have discovered this "prototype" of his own philosophy: "a humorous, indirect, existential defense of Christian faith against an overbearing systematic rationalism that threatened to deny it" (John R. Betz, "Hamann Before Kierkegaard: A Systematic Theological Oversight," *Pro Ecclesia* 16, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 304).

¹⁴ Rae, 172.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard explains that humor cannot be apprehended in a novel since "not-to-write" is part of the very nature of humor, and trying to be too direct and too nearly systematic in one's communication of the humorous, as an extended novel would require, "would betray an all too conciliatory position toward the world." Kierkegaard adds, "Just as Socrates left no books, Hamann left only as much as the modern period's rage for writing made relatively necessary, and furthermore only occasional pieces" (DD:37 / JP 2, 1700).

In another entry, Kierkegaard explains why humorists, such as Hamann and Climacus presumably, are by nature opposed to systematic philosophy: "Therefore the humorist can never actually become a systematizer, either, for he regards every system as a renewed attempt to blow up the world with a single syllogism in the familiar Blicherian manner; whereas the humorist himself has come alive to the incommensurable which the philosopher can never figure out and therefore must despise." While the humorist is always sensitive to what is "left over," the systematizer believes that whatever he cannot fit into his system "is erroneous and secondary" (DD:37.b / JP 2, 1702).

¹⁶ As Hamann writes, "Indeed, Socrates could very well afford to be ignorant; he had a tutelary genius, on whose science he could rely, which he loved and feared as his god, whose peace was more important to him than all the reason of the Egyptians and Greeks, whose voice he believed..." (James C. O'Flaherty, *Hamann's Socratic Memorabilia: A Translation and Commentary* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967], 171). Hamann's confidence in the provision of God for Gentiles leads him to the startling position that in Socrates' pagan daemon one can find, as O'Flaherty says, "a prototype of the Holy Spirit" (Ibid., 127).

they devised reasonable proofs and syllogisms, Hamann preferred the rags of Scripture, given to the common man.¹⁷ While they wrote in an elevated style, as befitted their learning and elevated content, Hamann “profaned a higher sanctuary,”¹⁸ using his *Stilbruch* that continually presented high and holy matters in a base and even crass writing style.¹⁹ Hamann was not fit for respectable company, and he loved it that way. For his taste, he preferred the foal of an ass to the divine horses that broke the neck of Phaethon.²⁰ Note, though, that this theological humility, centered on the incarnation of the Son of God, is in Kierkegaard’s eyes precisely what constitutes Hamann’s humor. Hamann’s humor was precisely the earnest confession of the lowly state of all humanity—including those who claim to be wise—and of Christ’s willingness to descend in lowliness to save.²¹ Kierkegaard took Hamann’s humor as a model for his own description of humor, where the various distinctions that constitute ethical success in life had to be brought low such that humanity’s universal need of God became more apparent to it than its personal successes and achievements. This humor is what Kierkegaard

¹⁷ Hamann repeatedly speaks of the “rags” of Scripture, which are not the least bit less valuable for their humble and lowly style. As he says, “We all find ourselves in a swampy dungeon like the one in which Jeremiah found himself. Old rags served as ropes to pull him out; to them he owed his gratitude for saving him. Not their appearance, but the services they provided him and the use he made of them, redeemed his life from danger. (Jer. 38:11-13)” (Betz [2009], 44-45).

¹⁸ O’Flaherty, 84-85. By “profane a higher sanctuary,” Hamann indicates his desire that the holy things of God be accessible to the “profane” common people.

¹⁹ Betz (2009), 11.

²⁰ Johann Georg Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, trans. and ed. Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 40. Phaethon was the son of the sun-god Helios, and he got his father’s reluctant permission to drive the sun chariot across the sky. The divine horses were too much for Phaethon to control, however, and the chariot veered to the earth, scorching much of Africa into desert and resulting in Phaeton’s death. Hamann’s point seems to be that a more manifestly divine set of writings than the humble Scriptures might prove to be more unwieldy and deadly than ameliorative.

²¹ O’Flaherty argues that, above all, it was Hamann’s humor and irony that kept him humble (O’Flaherty, 36).

prescribes in order for one to transition into a religious repentance that seeks God's gracious provision instead of one's own. In other words, Rae's finding in Kierkegaard Luther's message about the lowliness of Christ is directly connected to Hamann's humor and, therefore, to Kierkegaard's own humor. Rae's good point could be furthered and deepened with a consideration that does not merely mention Hamann's theological influence on Kierkegaard but ties that theological influence to what is integral to it in Kierkegaard's sight: Hamann's humor. If the goal is to better understand Kierkegaard's relation to Lutheran theology, it cannot be done adequately apart from a consideration of humor.

2) *Kierkegaard and Barth*

Consider a second place where Rae's argument could be strengthened through a consideration of the comic. Periodically in *Kierkegaard and Theology*, Rae expresses his disagreement with a charge that Karl Barth makes against Kierkegaard. Rae says, for example, "[Barth's] objection seems to be that Christianity is presented by Kierkegaard as an altogether too gloomy affair, that it leaves the reader overwhelmed by the burden of following Christ rather than set free by grace from the concern to justify oneself."²² As Rae reads it, Barth thinks that Kierkegaard dwells too heavily and morosely on the Christian duty of obedience to God rather than sufficiently emphasizing the Christian's freedom to give himself in love.²³ Rae ably defends Kierkegaard against Barth's charge

²² Rae, 145.

²³ Ibid., 157-58.

by illustrating how Kierkegaard does indeed teach the priority of God's grace and the delight of the Christian in striving to imitate Christ, despite Barth's charge.²⁴

To show that Kierkegaard has a healthy understanding of the relation between works and grace in a Christian's life, Rae draws heavily from Kierkegaard's *Judge For Yourself!* At one place,²⁵ in order to support his case, Rae considers an extended passage from *Judge For Yourself!* that centers on three images: the lilies of the field, the birds of the air, and a child called little Ludvig.²⁶ Consider the first image in more detail. In relation to the lilies of the field that do not work or spin since God clothes them, taken from Matthew 6:28, Kierkegaard says that the faithful seamstress does not simply give up sewing upon learning that it is really God who sews and spins. Rather, she applies herself all the more, knowing that when she sews God sews for her.²⁷ Rae rightly takes this as evidence of the priority of God's grace in human working and of the joy that is to be found there that is far from pure burden.²⁸ Rae's point is not as strong as it could be, however, for he entirely avoids Kierkegaard's discussion there about jest and earnestness, which is essential to what Kierkegaard is saying. In fact in Rae's selection of the passage, jest gets mentioned, but earnestness does not. Kierkegaard's passage is as follows:

²⁴ For another worthy defense of Kierkegaard that addresses Barth's charging him with legalism, individualism, and fixation on subjectivity, see Philip G. Ziegler, "Barth's Criticisms of Kierkegaard—A Striking out at Phantoms?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 9.4 (Oct 2007): 434-51.

²⁵ Rae, 159-60.

²⁶ XII 452-54 / *JFY*, 182-85. As this example shows, Kierkegaard repeatedly returns to the Gospel images of the lilies of the field and the birds of the air in his writings, especially in his later writings. The prevalence of these images may also imply something of the continuity of his understanding of humor across these writings.

²⁷ XII 452 / *JFY*, 183.

²⁸ Rae, 159.

But she, our own dear seamstress with the childlike piety, our lovable seamstress, she understands that only when she herself is sewing will God sew for her, and therefore she becomes all the more diligent in her work, so that by continually sewing she may continue to understand that—what a gracious jest!—it is God who sews, every stitch, so that by continually sewing she may continually understand—what earnestness!—that it is God who sews, every stitch.²⁹

The pairing of jest and earnestness is essential to Kierkegaard's point here where the same act of sewing when viewed in light of God's acting is both a "jest," since the human act of sewing is a little frivolity that is not at the end of the day what is truly responsible for any results achieved, and "earnestness," since to persist diligently in an act that one knows to be merely a jest is an earnest expression of faith in God's acting to fulfill his promises. To perform an act that is not understood to be both jest and earnestness is not to act in faithfulness under God. If the act were mere jest, then why bother with it? If the act were mere earnestness, this earnestness would be the obtuse earnestness of worldliness that trusts in human accomplishment instead of in God. This would be an expression of faithlessness. The true earnestness of acting faithfully before God confesses our actions as both a silly jest before God's almighty governance and yet as an earnest sacrifice given to him in joyful service.

Rae selects the right passage to make his argument in rebuttal to Barth, therefore, but his rebuttal, while desiring to make a theological point, misses that Kierkegaard's understanding of jest and earnestness is integral to his expression of that theological point. Acting in both jest and earnestness is the model that Kierkegaard gives to explain the nature of Christian striving. Put another way, for Kierkegaard jest and earnestness are existential correlates in the Christian's life to the theological doctrines of grace and works. In light of God's grace, human efforts are a mere jest. Nevertheless, human

²⁹ XII 452 / *JFY*, 183.

working is undertaken with the greatest striving since, locating its norms in eternity instead of temporality, it is therefore an earnest and faithful expression of joyful obedience to the God who reigns and works among us. To surrender our work would be an admission that we do not truly believe that God works in us.³⁰ The Christian's dilemma for how to live as one who performs works under grace is modeled, in Kierkegaard's description, in *comic* language: jest and earnestness. Thus, the heart of Barth's charge, that Kierkegaard stares too fixedly at works and insufficiently teaches the liberating grace of God—can be answered theologically by referencing Kierkegaard's works, which Rae does. However, as Rae himself has noted, since Kierkegaard's concern is not primarily to present a position at the level of theological doctrine but to touch human existence by giving a model for how to live out theological doctrines, then if one is to explicate Kierkegaard it must be done in the existential categories of the comic. The comic is the existential—as well as the theological—answer that Kierkegaard can offer to Barth's charge. If Kierkegaard appears too gloomy, it is because his account of the comic is insufficiently understood. Rae's theological task here is most essentially to be found in Kierkegaard's presentation of the comic as a combination of jest and earnestness.

W. Glenn Kirkconnell

W. Glenn Kirkconnell serves as a useful comparison to Murray Rae, for while both are contemporary scholars who examine Kierkegaard theologically, their methods

³⁰ “But the worthy, honest, God-fearing worker, he becomes all the more industrious, so that he will increasingly understand—what a gracious jest!—that God is the co-worker—what earnestness!.... But he does not sink into inactivity; he immediately sets to his work and tends to it—otherwise he does not really come to see that it is God who sows and reaps and gathers into barns” (XII 455 / *JFY*, 186).

are very different. Rae, while resisting the creation of a systematic theology, examines Kierkegaard topically, drawing from various sources throughout Kierkegaard's corpus to make his points. Kirkconnell, however, wants to give a theological reading of Kierkegaard *in situ*. That is, he wants to read Kierkegaard "from below" in such a way that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works—traditionally the more widely-read representatives of Kierkegaard's corpus—are read in conjunction with his upbuilding discourses.³¹ In this way, these two streams of Kierkegaard's writing would not be read in isolation from or in necessary opposition to one another, as Roger Poole does for example, but would be read as participants in the same conversation.³²

This method has several effects on how one reads Kierkegaard. One effect is that Kierkegaard's upbuilding discourses are allowed access into the important scholarly conversations that his pseudonymous works have enjoyed for years. Kirkconnell's method grants the upbuilding discourses the status of serious scholarly works of conceptual rigor and sophistication instead of dismissing them as works that are merely "simple, practical and applied."³³ A second effect of this method is that the upbuilding discourses, being more explicitly religious works, help to bring religious concerns to bear upon Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works, which are not always read with an eye towards their religious relevance. Reading the two streams of Kierkegaard's writing in conjunction increasingly opens the pseudonymous works to being read in light of

³¹ Kirkconnell (2008), 1-2.

³² See Ferreira's helpful appendix, comparing the chronology of Kierkegaard's two series of writings, both signed and pseudonymous (M. Jamie Ferreira, *Kierkegaard* [Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009], 16-17. Ferreira's introduction to Kierkegaard performs its own valuable service to this method of considering Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works in conjunction with his signed ones.

³³ Roger Poole, *The Laughter Is on My Side: An Imaginative Introduction to Kierkegaard*, eds., Roger Poole and Henrik Stangerup (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 9.

religious and theological questions and not only those traditionally considered to be within the province of philosophy. If Kierkegaard is considered to be purely a “philosopher,” apart from his relation to Christian religion and theology,³⁴ then, regardless of what valuable insights are discovered, they must be distorted precisely to the degree that religious questions are excluded. A third effect of the method of reading Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous writings in conjunction with his upbuilding discourses, one more immediately relevant to this dissertation, is that it increases the likelihood that Kierkegaard’s ideas about the comic, irony, humor, jest, and earnestness will be considered together with his ethical and religious concerns. If it is fairly non-controversial to detect an abundant use of the comic in Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works, then finding a similar use of it in the upbuilding discourses should challenge scholarly assumptions both about the lack of sophistication of Kierkegaard’s upbuilding discourses and about the comic’s opposition to the earnestness found therein.³⁵ The former strategy, exemplified in Poole among others, of sharply distinguishing Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works from his upbuilding discourses is a practice that serves a conception of the comic contrary to Kierkegaard’s own conception of the comic as being grounded in earnestness. To read Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works in conjunction with his upbuilding discourses, as Kirkconnell does, therefore ought to be more open the possibility of finding the comic’s relevance for theology.

³⁴ For example, in his biography of Kierkegaard, Hannay makes the astonishing claim that the young Kierkegaard “was to nurture a lifelong ambivalence towards Christianity which allowed him to hold it at a distance” (Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001], 39). Such a perspective has the effect of moving Kierkegaard away from a theological conversation and locating him more centrally in a philosophical conversation, which holds the most interest for Hannay.

³⁵ For example, recall that irony, which the Deconstructionists take as an indication of Kierkegaard’s lack of earnestness, was found to be integral to Kierkegaard’s *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* in Chapter Three.

Concluding Unscientific Postscript

It would be hoped, consequently, that Kirkconnell would have more to say about the comic in his project than he does. For example, in *Kierkegaard on Sin and Salvation*, Kirkconnell's second volume in his theological project, he examines *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, among other works by Kierkegaard. He does so, however, without ever mentioning the "comic" or "humor" in his entire book. "Irony" is mentioned a handful of times, with only one reference found within the section on *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* itself.³⁶ "Jest" is briefly considered but not to an adequate degree.³⁷ This is to say that Søren Kierkegaard's single most concentrated treatment of the comic, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, is considered by Kirkconnell amply in relation to subjectivity but never in relation to the comic which Climacus presents in immediate connection with that subjectivity. Again, the assumption appears to be that if the subjects to be considered are theological matters, such as sin and salvation, then the comic is not required or particularly to be desired.

Prefaces

Kirkconnell's treatment of *Prefaces* also falls within the scope of his second volume, but its treatment is brief. *Prefaces* only gets two full pages of sustained examination from Kirkconnell.³⁸ To be sure, Kirkconnell has much ground to cover in his survey and cannot dwell too long in any one location, but *Prefaces* deserves more

³⁶ W. Glenn Kirkconnell, *Kierkegaard on Sin and Salvation: From Philosophical Fragments through the Two Ages* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 85. "Irony" here is Kirkconnell's expression, not a consideration of Climacus' use of the term. *The Concept of Irony* is also referred to once in this section (Ibid., 79).

³⁷ Ibid, 124.

³⁸ Ibid., 50-52.

than this cursory examination and, I suggest, would get it if Kierkegaard's conception of the comic were better understood. As it is, *The Concept of Anxiety*, published on the same day as *Prefaces*, appears to be a much more earnest work with more theological relevance and so gets more than five times the space from Kirkconnell. *Prefaces*, however, has its own earnestness, as argued in Chapter Three.

Kirkconnell says that *Prefaces* is "a pure exercise in irony and ridicule."³⁹ To his credit, he does not make the Deconstructionists' error of denying the presence of earnestness here because of the discovery of irony. Kirkconnell recognizes the satirical quality to *Prefaces* and examines it accordingly but finds only partial relevance to his interests in the themes of sin and salvation. His best attempt is to say, "If Haufniensis [from *The Concept of Anxiety*] focuses on the problem of sin as generated by the infinite ethical demand upon the individual, Notabene [from *Prefaces*] depicts the evasion of the demands of individuality, and sin by collectivism."⁴⁰ His point has some merit, as far as it goes, but Kirkconnell's stated intent is to read Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works in conjunction with his signed ones, especially his upbuilding discourses,⁴¹ and *Prefaces* is not brought into a very fruitful encounter with his selected pairing, *Four Upbuilding Discourses* of 1844.⁴²

³⁹ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁴¹ Ibid., 1-2.

⁴² Ibid., 52-56. It should be noted that Kirkconnell could have made a different comparison for *Prefaces*, namely with *Three Upbuilding Discourse* of 1844, which were published in the same month and year as *Prefaces*. Nevertheless, I will not question his pairing but will seek to augment his decision as it stands.

I will here sketch out a few suggestions for how the pseudonymous *Prefaces* might be profitably read in conjunction with the signed *Four Upbuilding Discourses* of 1844 when understood against the background of Kierkegaard's conception of the comic. Johannes Climacus, in his survey of Kierkegaard's published works, says the following about *Four Upbuilding Discourses* of 1844: "[T]o me it was striking that the four most recent discourses have a carefully shaded touch of the humorous."⁴³ Taking a cue from this comment, then, one could read the discourses with an eye towards their connection to Kierkegaard's conception of humor, specifically. Humor is the border territory between the ethical and the religious and so undercuts the success of human striving and the various distinctions of human accomplishment in the name of a fundamental equality of abasement. The human condition is fundamentally identical, and this becomes even more pronounced when human beings stand before the holy standard of God, for whom none of our achievements impress.

Indeed, such a humorous note is sounded throughout these discourses. For example, the idea from the first discourse that "To Need God is a Human Being's Highest Perfection"⁴⁴ perfectly hits the point that relative human accomplishment is no true perfection. Our highest perfection is rather to have the need of our Creator, and Kierkegaard contrasts his theme with the prideful and ethico-centric idea that "a person could be just as ennobled and developed by himself without knowing God."⁴⁵

⁴³ *SKS* 7, 245 / *CUP* 1, 270.

⁴⁴ *SKS* 5, 291 / *EUD*, 297.

⁴⁵ *SKS* 5, 316 / *EUD*, 325.

The second discourse admonishes the person who desires to be excused from suffering, perhaps implying a desire to be excused from the human condition,⁴⁶ Rather, the fundamental equality of the human condition is emphasized when Kierkegaard says of the thorn in the flesh that “by pertaining to one single person, it pertains to all.”⁴⁷

The third discourse criticizes as foolish and cowardly the human complaint that one’s capability is too slight to begin acting,⁴⁸ which is a perspective that comes from making distinctions and comparisons among the relative capabilities of one’s fellow human beings. Instead, Kierkegaard emphasizes that “resolution” is fundamentally the same for all people.⁴⁹

The fourth discourse argues that even a mature person never finally escapes the child’s lack of judgment.⁵⁰ Kierkegaard loves to use the example of children to illustrate humor since he believes that the child expresses what is essential and therefore essentially shared in the human condition, prior to the comparisons of social distinction.⁵¹ Here, he adds the equalizing points that every human being is eternally indebted to God⁵² and that one cannot manifest his likeness to God unless “he himself becomes nothing.”⁵³

⁴⁶ *SKS* 5, 326 / *EUD*, 337.

⁴⁷ *SKS* 5, 333 / *EUD*, 346.

⁴⁸ *SKS* 5, 345 / *EUD*, 359.

⁴⁹ *SKS* 5, 347 / *EUD*, 361.

⁵⁰ *SKS* 5, 380 / *EUD*, 399.

⁵¹ E.g., “The humorist possesses the childlike but is not possessed by it...” (*SKS* 7, 500 / *CUP* 1, 551).

⁵² *SKS* 5, 381 / *EUD*, 400.

⁵³ *SKS* 5, 380 / *EUD*, 399.

Kirkconnell rightly highlights this last quotation in his consideration of the discourses,⁵⁴ but, by not undertaking a serious examination of the comic, he fails to note how the idea has a humorous touch, from Kierkegaard's perspective.

These humorous themes in *Four Upbuilding Discourses* can, then, be brought into conversation with similar themes in *Prefaces*. For example, the lampooning of the pride and social activity of the Total Abstinence Association in Preface V may be understood to be a critique of the ethical similar to that found in the discourses, where the effectiveness of human effort and the pride of distinction are undercut in favor of a message of humanity's fundamental equality before God. What is put polemically in the *Prefaces* by emphasizing the Association's foolishness is emphasized positively in the discourses through the putting forth of upbuilding ideas to encourage human maturation. That the ethical is finally undercut *in the name of God* in the discourses adds an explicitly theological dimension to one's reading of *Prefaces*, where it is otherwise more implicit.

Again, in *Prefaces* the negative example of the arrogant J. L. Heiberg suggests in its way the argument in the discourses against the socially-concerned ennobling of the self. One might argue that Heiberg's attempts at living objectively (illustrated by his philosophical Hegelianism and his interests in astronomy, for example) show a fundamental dissatisfaction with being in the human condition, which the discourses also lend their hands against. The ridicule found in *Prefaces* of Heiberg's desires to satisfy the demands of the times by finishing his philosophical system⁵⁵ finds an echo in the

⁵⁴ Kirkconnell (2010), 54.

⁵⁵ E.g., SKS 4, 477-78 / P, 13-14.

discourses, where Kierkegaard says that even God himself, being eternally unchanging, “would not be able to satisfy the demands of the times!”⁵⁶

If he so desired, then Kirkconnell could use these access points to return to his theme of sin. With the theological vantage offered by the discourses, the human foibles found in *Prefaces* are, indeed, shown to be sinful in their pride. Because humor subverts the ethical and facilitates existential transition to the religious, the bold ethical visions in the *Prefaces* are shown to be inadequate from the perspective of the religious. The fundamentally equal status of humanity, especially when considered in light of God, is a message found in both the merry *Prefaces* and the *Four Upbuilding Discourses*, with their humorous touch.

Conclusion

Rae and Kirkconnell are to be commended for their theological readings of Kierkegaard. Rae produces a careful reading of Kierkegaard’s theology that grants insight while showing appropriate restraint in shying away from a systematic theology. Perhaps more than any particular conclusion of his, Kirkconnell’s method is to be praised as a promising one that expands the effective canon of scholarly readings of Kierkegaard. The arguments of both, though, would be advantaged by bringing a consideration of the comic into their theological arguments.

Rae is right to note Luther’s influence on Kierkegaard through Hamann, but he fails to see that it is precisely Hamann’s humorous method of presenting his theological argument that Kierkegaard finds so appealing. He is also right to defend Kierkegaard against Barth’s charge by referencing the lilies of the field, the birds of the air, and the

⁵⁶ *SKS* 5, 377 / *EUD*, 395.

little child Ludvig. He does not notice, however, that all three are important instances of Kierkegaard's conception of humor and that to present this dimension of Kierkegaard's thought might make a more satisfactory rebuttal to Barth. For Kierkegaard, the comic is no frivolity since jest and earnestness is his model for illustrating Christian existence. One entails the other in proper Christian living. Indeed, Kierkegaard calls the bird of the air "the jester from whom [the God-fearing worker] learns the earnestness that it is God who sows and harvests and gathers into barns."⁵⁷ This jester teaches us the lessons of earnestness.

Kirkconnell does well to want to read Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works in conjunction with his signed works. He perhaps does not see, though, that this method, which would read putatively ironic or humorous works by Kierkegaard in conjunction with putatively earnest ones, naturally calls for an explanation for how the comic could be related to earnestness. As he expands our effective canon to include the upbuilding discourses, he should be mindful to expand it to include also seemingly ridiculous works such as *Prefaces* which have their own earnestness to bring. A theological reading of Kierkegaard needs access to and deeper understanding of Kierkegaard's conception of the comic in order to satisfy the demands of its own project.

⁵⁷ XII 455 / *JFY*, 186.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

Mark C. Taylor has said that Søren Kierkegaard demonstrates “more clearly than any previous author the importance of the complex relationship between humor and religious faith.”¹ It is hoped that this dissertation has made some progress in elucidating the nature of that relationship, including the relationship that irony and the comic in general have with sincere faith. The comic is integral to Kierkegaard’s account of ethical and religious formation, earning its existential forms, irony and humor, prominent roles in his stages of existence. The comic is also important for the more conceptual matters of Kierkegaard’s ethics and theology since the comic perspective implies a worldview and since the norms of the comic, through their formative influence, also shape one’s beliefs about the nature of reality. The self-confident ethicist, for example, has a very different understanding of himself and of his relationship to God than does the religious individual, who has passed through the formative border territory of humor. The very idea that our perspectives can be challenged and changed is inherent in the nature of the comic as a contradiction between norms, and the comic’s “way out” suggests that the challenges need not be fatal for us.

This dissertation may hold some insight for those interested in the comic, in ethics, in theology, or in the connection between the three, quite apart from any interest in

¹ Mark C. Taylor, “Humor and Humorist,” in *Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana vol. 3: Concepts and Alternatives in Kierkegaard*, ed. Marie Mikulová Thulstrup (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Boghandel, 1980), 228.

Kierkegaard himself. It is especially hoped, though, to be useful to those with an interest in Kierkegaard's own thought, particularly to those who believe that he has a deep wisdom regarding the nature of human existence that is helpful for both philosophical and theological circles, given his sincere Christian commitments.

Kierkegaard's reflections on the comic are extensive, and it is striking that, with a few exceptions such as John Lippitt, C. Stephen Evans, and Robert C. Roberts, the topic has been so underrepresented in Kierkegaard scholarship. Even in these cases, too little has been said about Kierkegaard's conception of the structure of the comic, how it forms people, and why its various manifestations—and not some other transitional devices—would have been chosen to play such crucial roles for his stages of existence. As Louis Mackey called attention to the role of the aesthetic in Kierkegaard's writings, the field of Kierkegaard studies needs to be called to an appreciation of Kierkegaard's use of the comic in a way that is more faithful to Kierkegaard's categories² than to those forced upon him by the assumptions of the scholar, as seen with the representative Deconstructionist scholars.

It is particularly to be desired that those who hold a theological interest in Kierkegaard would better appreciate his understanding and use of the comic. Much of my own sympathies lie with a tradition of Kierkegaard scholarship who see in the Dane not a Nietzschean critic of traditional Christianity, nor a proud aesthete whose fine art is

² For example, although the comic, irony, and humor are commonly acknowledged to be under "aesthetic" categories, the question should be raised as to whether this is the best way of understanding them in Kierkegaard's corpus. Kierkegaard treats these concepts primarily as ethical and religious ways of existing, not as aesthetic elements. Or, to put it another way, they are aesthetic categories that contain an inherent relation to human existence that is not often indicated by the term "aesthetic." Placing the comic under the category of the aesthetic to easily supports the disciplinary segregation between, say, literary interests and philosophical and theological interests that I have been combating here. The comic should not be classified in a way that lends tacit credence to this divorce.

to be appreciated without understanding, nor a perverse self-torturer whose writings are primarily to be plumbed for their prurient biographical details, nor a Deconstructionist Mad Hatter who makes witty banter while important matters go unexamined, but a perceptive Christian who is concerned that the traditional faith is being mishandled and distorted in the name of fashionable philosophy and cultural complacency. It is distressing, then, to see those with whom I otherwise share so much give short shrift to the important matter of the comic. For example, consider the words of one of the Kierkegaard scholars most influential to the North American tradition of reading Kierkegaard as a serious philosopher and theologian, Walter Lowrie:

It is no wonder that S. K., who had to struggle so hard against his disposition to irony and preserved to the end so keen a sense of humour, who also had devoted so much time at the university to the study of these subjects, should feel the need of allotting to each its appropriate place in the scheme of existence-spheres. I am not prepared to affirm that the result he reaches is very important; but what he has to say about this subject is very interesting to one who has a disposition to irony and some sense for the comical.³

Lowrie finds Kierkegaard's use of irony and humor in the stages of existence to be interesting but perhaps not very important. They are curiosities and marks of Kierkegaard's eccentricities more than insightful contributions to his views of human nature and existence. To view the comic in Kierkegaard's writings as an aesthetic mark more than an ethical engine, serving taste but not the explication of the human condition, is a gross underestimation of the extent and rigor of Kierkegaard's project. The connection that he sees among the comic, ethics, and theology ought not to be missed by any who read Kierkegaard for his ethical insight, and the oversight is even graver for those who read him with a theological interest.

³ Walter Lowrie, *Kierkegaard* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 325.

For Kierkegaard, the comic is “legitimate” because of its relation to ethics and, particularly, to religion.⁴ In his opinion, that Denmark was insufficiently earnest about living genuinely Christian lives was detectable by their failings in comic perception. What they laughed at—and did not laugh at—spoke to their worldviews and to their level of subjective maturity. As the example of *The Corsair* shows, when the public delighted a little too much in the gossip and cruelty of mocking public figures, it shows that they are insufficiently reflective about their own subjective failings. One feels free to revel comically in the failings of others if one believes one’s own position is fairly secure from such a critique. To recognize that one’s neighbor fails in the same ways as oneself, though, can still recognize the contradiction, but it lacks the shrill hilarity since it also finds one’s own resemblance to the other’s condition. This comic expression, for example, would demonstrate the maturity of Kierkegaard’s understanding of humor, which locates all of humanity in similar states of contradiction and failure. Such a humor is closer to religious repentance than to imperious mockery. In another example, the fact that so many of the Danish public *did not* laugh at the extreme claims of Hegelianism’s objective philosophy was, to Kierkegaard’s eyes, also evidence of subjective immaturity. One of sufficiently developed subjectivity cannot help but discover the incommensurability between inner and outer that characterizes existing human beings, and to overlook this—to forget that one is a human being—is comically incoherent position. When nobody laughs at such a philosophy that is so comically incompatible with human existence, though, it suggests that the public lacks sufficiently strong subjective norms to be able find the contradiction with Hegelian philosophy. The lack of

⁴ *SKS* 7, 465 / *CUP* 1, 513.

laughter at what deserves comic judgment is a different way the comic can evaluate one's subjective standing.

For Kierkegaard, though, the comic is not only diagnostic of subjective states. It can also be formative of them. Consequently, he wanted the Danish public to *stop laughing* at *The Corsair*, which was doing so much to deform them morally. To do so, he volunteered himself, one of respectable standing in Copenhagen, to be a martyr in the hopes that it would publicly demonstrate to Goldschmidt and others the power of the fire they were playing with and the damage it was doing. The comic is earnest business, and a public that is not aware of this needs to be made so. Additionally, when Kierkegaard observed that the public did not perceive the comic contradiction inherent to Hegelian philosophy, he wanted them to *start laughing* at it. To encourage this, he enlisted the comedic talents of pseudonyms such as Nicolaus Notabene in *Prefaces* and Johannes Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* in order to highlight the contradictions, going generally unnoticed, of Hegelian philosophy. One could attack Hegelianism directly by arguing with it, but Kierkegaard had a different tactic: get people to laugh at Hegelianism and at the philosophical elites who endorse it, such as J. L. Heiberg. By skillfully evoking the comic, the implicit norms necessary for the contradiction to exist could be indirectly existentially instilled in his audience. Hegelianism is very good at swallowing up direct argumentative opposition into its system, but it cannot withstand a comic critique. Kierkegaard thought Hegelianism to be especially helpless against categories such as irony and humor, which make excellent use of comic incognitos that depend on human subjectivity's not being soluble in the objective waters of Hegelianism. What was left over by the Hegelian system, whether it

was a lazy humorist such as Climacus, the simple delight of a child, or a trivial shard of subjectivity such as a preface, was all-important to Kierkegaard, and he hoped to show that it was precisely these seemingly trivial jests from human life that formed the indigestible elements on which the Hegelian maw would break its teeth.

Christianity too was indigestible to Hegelianism, according to Kierkegaard. The smooth flow of Hegelian reason could not account, Kierkegaard thought, for the Absolute Paradox of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Nor could the human mind, impressive as it was, finally understand either itself or the God who is infinitely and qualitatively different from ourselves. Christianity was another fly in the Hegelian ointment, and, if individuals were to begin living out their Christian faith in earnest, much headway could be made against the temptations of fashionable philosophy.⁵ Since Christianity stands in contradiction with even the highest of worldly thinking, including Hegelianism, it becomes essential to Kierkegaard that this contradiction be recognized. The comic serves as an important ally in this regard. That is, Christianity is in misrelation with worldly thinking, so this becomes an important locus in which to discover the comic contradiction. Sometimes it takes a humble jest, such as a little bird of the air or a lily of the field, to direct one's mind away from immanent thinking and towards the earnestness of the divine. Additionally, the comic may need to be more aggressive when it becomes clear that a worldly perspective has been conflated with or triumphed over the Christian message. It may be important, for example, to laugh at the

⁵ One might object that Hegel too was a Christian or, at least, that he conceived of himself as one. In Kierkegaard's opinion, however, Hegel's Christianity was in a very dubious state: "Hegel may very well be world-historical as a thinker, but one thing he has certainly lacked: he was not brought up in the Christian religion, or he was mediocrely brought up.... But Hegel's concept of Christianity is so far from bearing the imprint of this primitivity of childlike inwardness that his treatment of faith—for example, of what it is to believe—is nothing but pure foolishness. I am not afraid to say this" (*Pap.* VI B 98:45 / *JP* 2, 1610).

idea that it is significant to be considered Peter's successor, while no one fights for the honor of being considered Christ's follower.⁶ The comic, then, is an essential ally for the religious perspective, in Kierkegaard's opinion, so one should not be surprised to discover irony, humor, and other comic forms used abundantly even among the religiously earnest upbuilding discourses. If the comic can serve to shape one's character and one's views towards a perspective approximating that of Christian faith, then the comic may be properly said to be *praeparatio evangelica*. Indeed, by giving one skills for existing such that one is enabled to see the same act in its earnestness and in its jest under God, the comic also gives one a model for how a Christian, in devotion to God, may nevertheless live in a temporal world that usually does not share his concerns. While never the equal of faith, the comic can both prepare one for becoming a Christian and remind one of how a Christian is supposed to live.

Deconstructionist readers of Kierkegaard, such as Louis Mackey, Roger Poole, Elsebet Jegstrup, and Mark C. Taylor, would have a hard time understanding how Kierkegaard could make abundant use of the comic, including irony, in places where there is also a matter of great philosophical or theological importance at stake. They see the comic in Kierkegaard's writings (or think that they do), but they misunderstand what it is and why it is there. However, to take the presence of irony as the absence of earnestness is a direct infraction against what Climacus says about the matter.⁷ Further, it has the strange effect of making Kierkegaard appear to resemble his enemies. Poole locates Kierkegaard among Schlegel and the German Romantics. In Taylor's hands—

⁶ *SKS* 8, 327 / *UDVS*, 226.

⁷ *SKS* 7, 253.1 / *CUP* 1, 277n.

and possibly Jegstrup's—Kierkegaard appears Hegelian. The non-serious manic laughter of Mackey's latter days reminds one more of *The Corsair* than of Kierkegaard's careful explication and earnest employment of the comic. Such miscalculations not only do a disservice to Kierkegaard scholarship, they also are harmful for human existence.

On the other hand, theologians such as Murray Rae and W. Glenn Kirkconnell, able as they are, overlook the valuable addition that the comic could play for their theological analyses. They hold much insight into Kierkegaard's theological earnestness, but one gets the impression that they do not know how to handle the comic side of his personality. The comic would prove to be a valuable resource for theological readings of Kierkegaard, however, should the attempt be made, and its forfeiture proves costly. Speaking of the comic, Climacus says, "The religious does not dare to ignore what occupies people's lives so very much...."⁸

The state of Kierkegaard scholarship does not appear to have improved much since Climacus' lament over the mutual exclusion of the comic and the religious. The Deconstructionists who dismiss the philosophical and theological and the theologians who overlook the comic appear to be giving opposite readings of Kierkegaard, but, in fact, they make the same mistake of failing to perceive the legitimacy of the comic. It is not a toy and can be harmful if mishandled, but the comic has great powers in connection with human existence that ought to be recognized in ethics and theology. The comic, far from how it appears, is in fact a matter of great earnestness, and Kierkegaard was so convinced of this that he was willing to defend a proper understanding of the comic, both in his writings and by putting his own neck on the line in the *Corsair* affair. Through his

⁸ *SKS* 7, 465 / *CUP* 1, 513.

pseudonym Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard has taken great pains to explain how the nature of the comic has this (initially unintuitive) relation to earnestness. For the task of doing theology, as well as for the task of reading Kierkegaard himself, we would do well to heed his advice: “[I]t is just as questionable, precisely just as questionable, to be pathos-filled and earnest in the wrong place as it is to laugh in the wrong place.”⁹

⁹ *SKS* 7, 477 / *CUP* 1, 525.

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