

Evading the Issue: The Strategy of Kierkegaard's *Postscript*

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*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*¹ is a pseudonymous work written by Johannes Climacus which claims to raise and respond appropriately to the question 'How do I become a Christian?' Following Climacus's text there is 'A First and Last Explanation' signed by Kierkegaard himself in which he says that 'My pseudonymity . . . has . . . an *essential* basis in the *production* itself', that the pseudonymity of works like *Postscript* (hereafter CUP) is essential for the kinds of work they are. And in denying that one can attribute anything the pseudonyms say to him, Kierkegaard says that what 'has been written, then, is mine, but only insofar as I, by means of audible lines, have placed the life-view of the *creating*, poetically actual individuality in his mouth' (p. 625). At the end of the 'Explanation' he adds that the importance of the pseudonyms is 'in wanting to have no importance, in wanting, at a remove that is the distance of double-reflection, once again to read through solo, if possible in a more inward way, the original text of individual human existence-relationships' (pp. 629–30). These remarks invite us to ask in relation to CUP² what the 'life-view' of the 'poetically actual individuality'

1. All references are to S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, edited and translated by H. Hong and E. Hong, Princeton, 1992.

2. What follows is indebted to the account of the nature of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship James Conant has developed in a series of recent papers. I hope to further the cause of its acceptance by offering a description of the strategy of CUP in rather more detail than Conant, for the purposes of his papers, needed to do, although I do not know to what extent he would agree with what I say. Cf.: 'Must We Show What We Cannot Say?', in R. Fleming and M. Payne (eds), *The Sense of Stanley Cavell* (Bucknell, 1989); 'Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard and Nonsense', in T. Cohen, P. Guyer, H. Putnam (eds), *Pursuits of Reason* (Lubbock, 1994); 'Putting Two and Two Together', in T. Tassin and M. von der Ruhr (eds), *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief* (London, 1996). I would like to express my gratitude to my colleague Stephen Mulhall for bringing these papers to my attention and for his forceful advocacy of the position they propose.

who is Johannes Climacus is, and perhaps in asking that we may throw some light on what might be meant by 'the distance of double-reflection' at which the pseudonyms are said to operate.

1

There appears to be no difficulty in answering the first part of this question, since Climacus tells us in the chapter before the Conclusion 'I . . . am myself essentially a humorist' (p. 451) and the position of this remark presumably means that it will cast a retrospective light on the previous four hundred and fifty or so pages. However, this self-identification presents us with an interpretive problem. Is it itself meant humorously? If so, does this mean that Climacus is not a humorist or that, since it is humorous, that he is? Or is it not meant humorously, and would this show that, despite his avowal, Climacus is deceived in thinking he is a humorist? And we might wonder whether this difficulty had something to do with the 'double-reflection' Kierkegaard speaks of, since in trying to understand what Climacus had said (the first reflection) we see that it must be applied to itself. We are then left wondering how we could know what construction to put on these words, and so provoked into a second reflection. We have been given a reflective knot which we must then untie ourselves. In order to do this, we need at least to discover what Climacus understands by a 'humorist'. He has already told us something of this in an appendix to Chapter Two of the final part of the book where he discusses the pseudonymous literature and his own previous work, *Philosophical Fragments* (hereafter PF), and he returns to the matter in the chapter which contains his self-identification. In the appendix, Climacus tells us that 'humor is the last stage in existence-inwardness before faith' (p. 291). And in the later chapter he says that the humorist 'continually . . . joins the conception of God together with something else and brings out the contradiction – but he does not relate himself to God in religious passion' (p. 505). The humorist brings out the contradiction between, on the one hand, the requirement placed on an individual by their relation to the absolute, God, and, on the other, the concrete details of the everyday life they lead (Climacus has just spent twenty or so pages considering what it might be for a religious person to wonder whether he could, in terms of his God-relationship,

take a trip to an amusement park) but *humorously*.³ For the religious believer, who 'joins the conception of God together with everything and sees the contradiction, but in his innermost being he relates himself to God' (p. 505), this contradiction isn't humorous, but rather of the deepest concern, since he has to express his God-relationship in all the manifold details of his life. And, of course, for the non-religious individual there is no contradiction humorously conceived or otherwise, since they do not 'join the conception of God' with anything. The contradiction can only *appear* and do so *humorously* to someone who attempts to distance himself from *both* the religious and the non-religious. Unlike the non-religious, the humorist does 'join the conception of God with something' and so has a certain kind of relation to that conception, but unlike the religious, this relation is not one of passionate concern. He appears, therefore, to occupy a position *outside* both the religious and non-religious life. But since he *lives*, this can only be appearance, and any assertion that he occupies such a position, by, let us say, identifying himself as a humorist, would be a deception, whether it is also a self-deception or not. Now, in the appendix to Chapter Two of Part Two (and therefore prior to his own apparent self-identification as a humorist in chapter four), Climacus himself identifies this deception with the one involved in speculative philosophy. 'Humor, when it uses Christian categories (sin, forgiveness of sin, atonement, God in

3. The 'jest in humor', Climacus tells us, 'lies in the revocation (an incipient profundity is revoked)' (p. 552) and he gives us an example of what he means. 'We are all guilty', a humorist would say; 'we fall many times and into many pieces, all of us who belong to the animal species called human', which Buffon describes as follows . . . 'Thereupon a definition entirely along the lines of natural history could follow. The contrast here has reached its highest: between an individual who in eternal recollecting has the totality of guilt-consciousness and a specimen of an animal species' (p. 553). 'We are all guilty' is the religious conception which characterizes our inadequacy in relation to the demand of the absolute conception, God. It therefore applies to us totally and not to our falling 'many times', something the humorist indicates he knows by adding the incongruity of 'and into many pieces' (a phrase which implies our mortality, and reminds us that for the religious death has lost its victory before God). But this revoking of the religious sense of guilt for the non-religious in terms of which we may sometimes fall and sometimes not, is now itself revoked in identifying us simply as members of an animal species. Characterized just like that, any notion of guilt would be inapplicable. What is comical is that beings who are members of an animal species nevertheless have a consciousness of absolute guilt before God. The contrast is brought out in such a way as to seem comic in the revocation of the religious profundity, 'We are all guilty', by first reinterpreting it against its religious sense in non-religious terms, and then revoking the notion of guilt entirely by characterizing us in terms of animality.

time, etc.) is not Christian but a pagan speculative thought that has come *to know* all the essentially Christian . . . at the point where the decision comes in the moment and the movement is forward toward the relation to the eternal truth that came into existence in time – at that point humor is not present. Modern speculative thought deceives in the same way' (p. 272). The humorist's relation to the religious categories is 'speculative', one of 'knowing' in a disinterested manner. But although his humour seems to require a similar position in relation to the non-religious too, so that the 'contradiction' can appear in a humorous contrast, this is obviously impossible since the humorist is a living individual who cannot have a disinterested relation to his own life. The humorist *lives* in non-religious categories but appears not to do so. To claim to occupy a position outside the non-religious and the religious is itself comical (as Climacus's discussion of modern speculative thought in Part One has tried to show). But now, for whom does the contradiction between the claimed position of the humorist and existence appear and so as comic? For the humorist? And yet it is comic. The meaning of Climacus's apparent self-identification as a 'humorist' is further complicated by his claim that humour is the 'incognito' of the religious. A religious person who practises the self-renunciation required by their relation to the absolute, God, will not (unless totally transformed) be able to hide their suffering completely, he says, but desiring to maintain their God-relation in secret they will hinder its direct expression by the humorous. Although really religious, such an individual will be 'in his outer appearance . . . a humorist' (p. 501). Climacus immediately adds, however, that 'an observer who is looking for a religious person and intends to recognize him by the humorous would be fooled if he met me . . . I am not a religious person but simply and solely a humorist' (ibid.), which is, of course, just what such a religious person would say.

There is a further piece of self-characterization in the appendix to chapter two of Part Two in which Climacus discusses the pseudonymous literature, for there he gives an account of the nature of his own writing in PF, although characteristically contained in a footnote on a review of the book. PF, he says, is written 'for people in the know, whose trouble is that they know too much' (p. 275). The effect of this 'knowing too much' is that Christian truth has been reduced to something anyone 'knows': 'Because everyone knows the Christian truth, it had gradually become a triviality' (ibid.). They

'know' the Christian truth, that is, have a disinterested, reflective relation to it, precisely the relation in terms of which Climacus has characterized the 'humorist'. The communication of PF intends to 'take away' this knowledge, to get the reader to recognize that the Christian truth is not a matter for 'knowing'. How can this be done? 'When a communication takes a portion of the copious knowledge that the very knowledgeable man knows and communicates it to him in a form that makes it strange to him, the communicator is, as it were, taking away his knowledge at least until the knower manages to assimilate the knowledge by overcoming the resistance of the form' (ibid.). This 'form' in PF lies, says Climacus, in the 'teasing resistance of the imaginary construction to the content' and 'the parody of speculative thought in the entire plan'. That is, PF takes Christian truth and renders it explicitly in the form of an object of thought, through the new form of the 'imaginary construction', but in so doing makes it *unthinkable* so as to reveal the effort as a parody, as a form of writing in essential contrast to what it claims to be about. The communication thus requires a 'double reflection', the untying of the knot formed by the contrast of form with (apparent) content. In this way, the assumption of the reader, that Christian truth is an object for disinterested thought, is itself undermined, leaving them in a position where they may 'assimilate' it, if they will, appropriately (whatever that may turn out to be). The comic lies, as Climacus has said, in 'contradiction'. Here the contradiction lies, not, as with the humorist, in the relation of religious truth to a human being who is at the same time an animal, but in the relation between the nature of religious truth and how this is understood by those who claim to be familiar with it. If, furthermore, for the humorist, the 'jest lies in the revocation (an incipient profundity is revoked)', here it lies in revoking the apparent 'profundity' people claim to believe (something they believe as a 'profound thought') by treating it explicitly as an object of thought and revoking its thinkability, thereby rendering it ludicrous. In this way, the relation to 'the truth' in terms of disinterested thought is parodied and so made both evident and comical to the one who can unravel the doubly reflected communication.

CUP has, following the Conclusion, an appendix, 'An Understanding with the Reader'. In this Climacus says 'the book has not only a conclusion but has a revocation to boot' (p. 619) and the appendix contains this expression of revocation: 'Everything is to be

understood in such a way that it is revoked' (ibid.). What is here revoked is the *book* itself'. In the prior Conclusion he tells us 'what this whole book has been about', namely that 'Since the highest is to become and to continue to be a Christian, the task cannot be to reflect on Christianity but can only be to intensify by means of reflection the pathos with which one continues to be a Christian' (p. 607). And in the following appendix Climacus indeed stresses the personal nature of the question he has claimed to ask: 'the whole book is about myself, simply and solely about myself' since it was apparently precipitated by Climacus asking 'How do I become a Christian . . . I ask solely for my own sake. I have asked about it, for that is indeed the content of the book' (pp. 617–18). The book, however, has indeed been a 'reflection on Christianity' whereas the Conclusion denies that such reflection is the task if one asks, as Climacus claims to do, the personal question, 'How do I become a Christian?' He continues in the Appendix that the book is written only for an imagined reader who 'can understand that the understanding is a revocation – the understanding with him as the sole reader is indeed the revocation of the book' (p. 621). To understand the book is to revoke it, to see that to ask 'How do I become a Christian?' is not to ask a question to which the appropriate response is the reflection we have been drawn into (in accordance with our own desires) through CUP – to which the appropriate response is not a *book*. This is the comic contradiction. In revoking the book Climacus marks that not only is its claim to be a response to the question it apparently asks, 'How do I become a Christian?', in contradiction with the question, but that the question itself is only apparently raised. We read the book because we think we are going to discover something essential in relation to such a question, and so in relation to the questions we are *inclined* to think, as reflective individuals, we have about our own existence. We think such questions can be posed and resolved in the form of a book, in terms of a disinterested inquiry. The jest lies in the revocation: if, having been led through this tortuous journey, we see the joke, we are confronted by the expectations which fuelled our interest and laugh *at ourselves*. As Climacus says in the Conclusion: 'I am a friend of difficulties, especially of those that have the humorous quality, so that the most cultured person, after having gone through the most enormous effort, essentially has come no further than the simplest human being can come' (p. 607). Only the 'cultured' would be tempted to read

the book: the joke is that what such a person thinks of as her or his distinction (knowing about philosophy, theology, literature, history, ancient and modern languages, and so forth, and having the capacity for philosophical reflection) is no distinction at all in regard to the question the book apparently raises since that question can really arise only in such a way that there is no difference between the 'simple' and the 'cultured' – and yet the reader must have thought their distinction counted for something in reading the book to 'resolve' the question.

The 'humorist' Climacus characterizes in the book stands in an apparently disinterested relation to the religious and the non-religious and humorously brings out the contradiction between the divine and the human. The humour of such a humorist occurs in a way which does not involve the humorist, or the one who laughs with him: what is 'comical' appears as such only in the position of an 'object' of (humorous) contemplation. But Climacus's strategy works to *involve* us, by giving us something we desire to understand and then rendering it, as we shall see, unthinkable, so that, if we understand the revocation of the book, and so the jest, we find *ourselves*, our desire to understand and our conception of our own distinction which it implies, comical. This is the significance of a 'doubly reflected' communication form, that it provides a paradox for the understanding in the contrast between 'what' is apparently said and 'how' it is said, the unravelling of which must be done by the reader, thus revealing to her the nature of her own illusion. And there an opening is made, in the case of PF and CUP, in which the reader, if she has thought that she is a Christian because of some intellectual account she has to give of it, or that she would become one if only such an account were forthcoming, can come to relate *appropriately* to the Christian truth, whether in acceptance or rejection, but at any rate relieved of an illusion.

How, then, are we to understand Climacus in the book saying 'I am essentially a humorist'? Well, our initial impression was right, we can't understand it. If it is meant humorously, he says he isn't, but then he is; if it is not meant humorously, then he says he is but he isn't. But now we can see that this prevention of understanding is the point, since it is the point of the book as a whole: it has the characteristic form of a 'doubly-reflected' communication which sets out to incite our desire to understand it, only to defeat it so that the illusion that we are under, that the issue is something to understand,

may be dispelled. And this gives another sense to Climacus's saying in the final appendix, where he hopes to establish an 'understanding' with his reader, that 'the whole book is about myself', since the form of the book, that of a 'doubly-reflected' communication in which the 'content' lies in essential contrast to *how* it is expressed, is *exemplified* in Climacus's self-identification. We are thus prevented even from understanding the book as an 'expression of a life-view', since it is impossible to say who Climacus is. The desire to do so is thereby shown to us as a further manifestation of the evasion of acknowledging the nature of the Christian truth as an existence communication by rendering it a subject for the understanding. But then, Kierkegaard's own 'Final and Last Explanation', which tempted us to pursue this line of inquiry, shows itself as an indirect communication too.

In what follows I shall try to outline the stages through which this strategy of a doubly-reflected communication is carried out, through which we are led to see that the joke is on us.

2

The Preface gives a strong hint as to the character of the book. It is a 'Postscript' to PF, a book which has been completely ignored, Climacus says, in accordance with the author's wishes. But he still worries that this wish might yet be 'frustrated by some mistake' (p. 5) given the addiction of the age to 'prophecy and vision and speculative thought', that is, to intellectual reflection. He now hopes for the same fate for CUP. Hence the point of CUP, and the sense in which it is a 'Postscript' to PF, is to prevent the mistake, that it, and PF, should be taken up as a contribution to intellectual reflection and what passes for 'knowledge'.

The Introduction then makes clear the nature of the feared mistake: it is to think that 'erudite and scholarly work' can be a preparation for religious faith. Such an idea is a 'delusion' which would 'change faith into something else, into another kind of certainty' (pp. 11–12). Such 'delusion' is revealed by the 'dialectician'. Whereas the orator 'moves', the scholar provides historical knowledge and the systematician claims to reveal the philosophical truth of religion, the dialectician operates by revealing the contradiction between these activities and the issue of faith. In respect of historical

and philosophical inquiry, the contradiction is between their essentially disinterested relation to the objects of their researches and the personal nature of the issue of faith. But now the 'issue' of PF is presented, 'Can a historical point of departure be given for an eternal consciousness . . . can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge?', which appears as both a preliminary to the issue of faith and as something which certainly looks like an intellectual problem. Climacus emphasizes that this issue is raised by him *personally* as a *preparation* for determining whether or not he will become a Christian: 'I, Johannes Climacus . . . assume that a highest good, called an eternal happiness, awaits me . . . I have heard that Christianity is one's prerequisite for this good. I now ask how I may enter into relation to this doctrine' (p. 16). Thus, on the one hand, Climacus claims the question is raised in relation to the issue of his own faith, whether to become a Christian or not, while on the other, the question is put in such a way that it appears to demand an intellectual inquiry to settle it and as if this settling of it could be decisive for him in relation to faith. In *accepting* the formulation we are complicit with what Climacus has already said is a 'delusion'. The formulation of the 'issue' in PF and CUP is an *evasive intellectualizing* of a question which is existential, requiring a personal situation of crisis and decision, and thus reveals that, if phrased like his, the speaker is not asking the question at all. The intellectualized question, and the 'inquiry' to settle it, can indeed take place in a book. The existential question which Christianity is, cannot: if it takes place, it does so in the context of a person's life. And Climacus will in the end revoke the book, and so the question, and leave us with our lives, to make of them what we will in the face of the Christian existential requirement. Part One, 'The Objective issue of the truth of Christianity', brings out the contradiction between the 'issue' as personal ('How can I, Johannes Climacus, share in the happiness that Christianity promises? The issue pertains to me alone' (p. 17)) and historical and philosophical inquiry. Either the proposed inquirer is already in a relation of faith, in which case the inquiries are irrelevant, or he or she is not, and stands, as an inquirer, in a relation of observation, disinterested investigation. But if the latter, then the individual 'is not infinitely interested in deciding the question': that is, the question for them is not personal, informed by the concern one has with one's own life. And if that is the case, the question, which is personal, cannot appear for the inquirer. The humour of

the contradiction is brought out by the contrast between the lived nature of scholarly or philosophical inquiry (any result becomes the subject of further inquiry) with the lived issue which is to *decide* the meaning of one's life. Treating the latter as a matter of inquiry simply puts off indefinitely any decisiveness, and yet the individual, the meaning of whose life is meant to be at issue, goes on living as before. It might seem, then, that in Part Two, 'The Subjective Issue, the Subjective Individual's Relation to the Truth of Christianity, or Becoming a Christian' (p. 59), the issue will be presented in an appropriate form (while, if we have attended to the nature of the delusion Climacus has already identified, we should know it cannot be).

3

Part Two begins with two chapters ostensibly on Lessing. This complies with our intellectual expectations, since what we think we are about to get is a 'subjective' interpretation of the issue which it is necessary to understand before we can determine whether or not to become a Christian, and here we are apparently going to deal with a predecessor's thought which Climacus will then, presumably, correct and go beyond. But these two chapters neither presuppose our knowledge of Lessing nor contribute to it. The first expresses a gratitude to Lessing, which Climacus immediately asks to be pardoned for, emphasizing its 'jesting form' (p. 64). His gratitude to Lessing does not pertain to him as savant, librarian (!), dramatist, poet or aesthetician, but to his *refusal* of all admiration and gratitude! Lessing, says Climacus, understood that 'the religious pertained to Lessing and Lessing alone, just as it pertains to every human being in the same way' and so understood that religiously 'he had infinitely to do with God, but nothing, nothing to do directly with any human being' (p. 65). Having no such relation to anyone else in the matter of the religious, he cannot provide anything for which a reader could be grateful. If this is so, Climacus blithely continues, then he will admire him, but then Lessing 'would justifiably be able to say: there is nothing to thank me for' (p. 65) since then he, Lessing, would have failed in refusing any direct connection with another in the matter of the religious. Yet Lessing *wrote* – and Climacus writes. It is precisely the 'how' of Lessing's writing which Climacus claims

leads him to attribute to him the understanding that the religious concerns Lessing alone. This style prevents us from saying whether he was Christian or not, or whether he defended or attacked Christianity. It is a style characterized, Climacus says, by a mix of jest and earnestness where it is 'impossible for a third person to know definitely which is which – unless the third person knows it *by himself*' (p. 69). Lessing's text presents the reader with a contrast between content and form which the reader herself must resolve. Since Climacus has just stressed that Lessing understands that the religious pertains to him alone (and to everyone else in the same way), the result of the untying of this interpretive knot must be to place the reader herself in such a position in relation to the religious and so to get her to *stop* reading Lessing. Further, Climacus claims that Lessing now and then 'places a false stress on the indifferent' so that the one who wants to understand may better grasp what is 'decisive' while giving those who simply 'read' Lessing nothing to talk about. And finally, Climacus remarks on the way Lessing's use of the first-person pronoun prevents partnership with the reader. All these so-called features of Lessing's style are ones which prevent the appearance of straightforward communication in relation to the religious and present the reader with a hermeneutic problem she must resolve herself. In accordance with Climacus's claims about Lessing, the resolution of this problem would leave her alone with the religious and so prevent her reading him.

But this discussion doesn't, of course, tell us anything about Lessing (there are no references to his writings in the chapter). Its function is, rather, to alert us to the nature of the text we ourselves are reading. These very remarks, apparently about Lessing, seem at once jesting and earnest, are in the first person, and raise the question whether they stress the indifferent (i.e. Lessing) or not. This reflexivity makes us unable to read the text in a straightforward way: it makes us desire an interpretation which at the same time it rejects ('it is impossible for a third person to know definitely . . .'). The text thus exemplifies the characteristics of a 'doubly-reflected' communication precisely in the process of attributing them to Lessing. And the remarks in Chapter One end by declaring that Lessing produces no results and so if Climacus were to derive results from him, Lessing would laugh at him (p. 71). But then chapter two announces precisely what has just been said to be laughable: 'Possible and Actual theses by Lessing!' If we draw results from this, who will laugh at us?

These 'theses' Climacus attributes to Lessing all negate themselves: they claim to tell us something which at the same time they assert cannot be said. The first, 'The subjective existing thinker is aware of the dialectic of communication' in religious matters, is a rearticulation of Climacus's claim in the previous chapter that Lessing understood that the religious concerned him alone. The subjective existing thinker has freed herself from all others 'so the secret of communication specifically hinges on setting the other free' (p. 74) which the features of Lessing's style are said to do. But such 'freedom' from others is, of course, freedom from Lessing or Climacus too, and so freedom *from the text*. And this will therefore constitute the form of the text we are reading. It is characteristic that Climacus proceeds to run through a series of 'thoughts' which he then says cannot be directly communicated (p. 75), yet in stating them, of course, he has apparently done just that. Looking forward, these 'thoughts', that truth is inwardness, objectively there is no truth, that the appropriation is the truth, that there is no result but a person's God relation is a secret, are precisely those which Climacus will in chapter two of Section two *himself assert*.

The second thesis is that the subjective thinker's relation to 'the infinite and the eternal' cannot be possessed as a result so that she is always 'striving'. The content of her life expresses this 'negativity'. But, Climacus says, this cannot be communicated as 'negative wisdom', which is, of course, exactly how it has just been 'communicated'. These first two 'theses' Climacus finds 'possibly' in Lessing, whilst for the third and fourth he adduces textual evidence – which is remarkable given that Lessing has been 'admired' for avoiding this possibility and we have just been told that the subjective thinker's communication is intended to free the reader from others, and so from looking for textual support. It comes as no surprise, then, to find that the 'evidence' is contradictory. The third thesis claims that 'contingent historical truths can never become a demonstration of eternal truths of reason, and that the transition whereby one will build an eternal truth on historical reports is a leap' (p. 91). Climacus claims that Lessing communicates this 'lack of decisiveness' by *failures* of expression: that is, that the textual evidence is at odds with what he, Climacus, claims it supports! So Lessing is quoted as asserting that if one were contemporary with claimed miracles and prophecies then one would be in a better position in relation to the eternal truths so that no leap would be necessary, and that a leap is only

required over a 'broad ditch', and as speaking of 'trying to make the leap' as if one could come close to making it but not quite manage to do so. Since Climacus says the 'leap' is 'the category of decision', all these are nonsense, so the textual support evaporates. And what appears in Lessing's quote as 'eternal truths of reason' now appears as 'the absurd' and 'what cannot be thought', phrases which negate the truth of a 'truth of reason' itself: 'it is left to the single individual to decide whether he will by virtue of the absurd accept in faith that which indeed cannot be thought' (p. 100). This form of expression, however, is itself contradictory, for it seems to imply that there is some 'truth' which at the same time cannot be thought but which could be 'accepted'. Such a form of expression invites us to continue the intellectual struggle to *understand* what is being said, while the form of Climacus's writing, exposed in his description of Lessing's style, constantly works against this attempt. The fourth thesis, Lessing's claim that if God held all truth in one hand and in his other 'the one and only everlasting drive for truth' Lessing would choose the latter (p. 106), seems to imply that there *is* such truth, whilst Climacus's interpretation is that Lessing meant there is only constant striving without result. This 'thesis' is, of course, one which has already, in the discussion of the first thesis, been said to be inexpressible, and which Lessing's quote certainly does not state. But given Climacus's claim that Lessing refused any relation to others in religious matters, this very desire to find textual support contradicts what Climacus has asserted is admirable in him. Why then do we desire textual support, this time from Climacus himself, in relation to 'the issue'? This desire Climacus will now exploit.

4

Section Two of Part Two (the apparent complexity of the structure of the book, with its parts, sections, divisions, divisions of divisions and appendices, is surely part of the parody of a serious intellectual inquiry) now proposes to tell us 'How subjectivity must be constituted in order that the issue can be manifest to it' which the Conclusion later calls the 'subjective interpretation' of 'becoming or being a Christian' (p. 607). The issue the book as a whole claims to address is 'how to become a Christian', and so the relevance of Section Two would appear to be that it is necessary to understand

this interpretation (at least for such a person as Climacus is here presenting himself to be, and as the reader understands herself, as an intellectual inquirer) to understand how to become a Christian, which in turn is a necessary preliminary to becoming one. Chapter One of Section Two opens with a criticism of speculative philosophy's relation to religion which operates by contrasting to comic effect the speculative ambitions of the philosopher with the philosopher's own existence as an individual. World historical importance, Climacus says, comes through accident, and a concern with it thus makes a person incompetent to act, yet the philosopher as an individual is always acting. World history, further, is a matter of disinterested observation and investigation and yet is supposed to reveal the significance of our lives. But such significance cannot be a matter of disinterest to an existing human being. As the subject of disinterested inquiry, the material philosophy concerns itself with is subject to 'ever new observation and research' so that any result is hypothetical, but then wanting the significance of one's life to be determined by such an investigation is tantamount to an indefinite postponement, which is impossible for an existing human being, who is, of course, already living. World history, furthermore, concerns a generality, the human race, and so what we can see in it is abstract, but the individual is not for herself such a generality and it is this relation which is at issue in respect of the significance of life. The comedy is well-taken, but it cannot escape one's notice (well, of course, it can) that it rebounds on the text we are reading itself. For, are we not reading (by accident, since we might not have come across the book, yet it claims to tell us something we need to know in relation to the significance of our lives) a disinterested investigation (into the subjective conditions for raising the issue) which arouses a variety of questions of interpretation and argument (look at Kierkegaard scholarship) in terms of which discussion can go on indefinitely, and this investigation concerns a general and abstract notion of 'subjectivity'. And all this as a preliminary to facing the *personal* issue of faith.

At this point Climacus offers us a sign-posted exit from the text (which we will not, of course, follow), saying that he would 'gladly be the simple one who stops . . . the wise person' with the 'simple observation . . . Is it not precisely the simple that is most difficult for the wise man to understand? The simple person understands the simple directly, but when the wise person is to understand it, it becomes

infinitely difficult' (p. 160). The difference 'between the wise person and the simplest person is this little evanescent difference that *the simple person knows the essential* and the wise person little by little *comes to know* that he knows it *or comes to know* that he does not know it, but what they know is the same' (ibid.). But if what they know is 'the same', then the process by which the wise person comes to know that they know must be by *losing* the difficulties which his own desire for understanding has put in his way, difficulties the 'simple' do not have.

If we are not stopped by this, Climacus then offers to show how certain issues become 'difficult' for the 'subjective thinker', with whom we have now identified ourselves in our desire to understand. For example, 'what it means to die'. Against the disinterested investigation of the philosopher, Climacus emphasizes that this question is personal, and so interested and individual: '*my dying is by no means something in general . . . Nor am I for myself something in general*'. As personal, it is a matter of 'how the idea of (death) must change the person's whole life if he, in order to think its uncertainty, must think it every moment in order thereby to prepare himself for it. (But) what (does it mean) to prepare oneself for it, since here again a distinction is made between its actual coming and the idea of it (a distinction that seems to make all my preparation something meaningless if that which actually comes is not the same as that for which I have prepared myself, and if it is the same, the preparation, if consummate, is death itself), and since it can indeed come at the very moment I am beginning the preparation' (pp. 168–9). These expressions give with one hand what they take with the other (how does one think *every* moment? thinking is preparation, yet there can't be preparation). That the 'issue of the meaning of death' is not an issue for 'thought', and that 'subjective thinking' is a delusion, is indicated by the collapse of the distinction between thinking and acting: 'for the subject it is an act to think his death . . . he actually thinks what is thought by actualizing it, consequently that he does not think for a moment: Now, you must keep watch every moment – but that he keeps watch every moment' (p. 169). But then what is the point of calling this 'subjective thinking'? Climacus begins by objecting to objective thought about 'the meaning of death' that for the subject any such thought must be personal and interested, but then proposes (to the reader desiring to understand) that there could, however, be 'subjective thinking'. But when this is 'explained', the conditions for

our understanding 'subjective thinking' as thinking are removed. 'Subjective thinking' about the issue must occur every moment, it cannot be a preparation for living in a particular way, and it is an 'act' in which the distinction between thinking and doing is collapsed. This undermining of the conditions for our understanding what 'subjective thinking' might be suggests that such 'thought' about the meaning of death is an intellectual evasion and one with which Climacus invites us to be complicit.

After discussing these issues in terms of 'subjective thinking', Climacus once again offers us the way to the exit by repeating a distinction between the wise and the simple. What is developed here in CUP, he says, does not pertain to 'simple folk' who don't feel the need for 'any other kind of understanding' but is rather directed 'to the person who considers himself to have the ability and the opportunity for deeper inquiry' (p. 170 – note the 'who considers himself' here). Climacus himself is one of those who are 'not altogether simple, inasmuch as we feel a need to understand but still are so limited that we feel particularly the need to understand the simple' (p. 182) which Climacus has already said the simple already understand. So what is the 'other kind of understanding' which the wise, and Climacus (and we) need but the simple do not? Is the project of 'subjective thinking' such a form of understanding, or is the way it unravels an indication to us that the 'other kind of understanding' the wise person needs is precisely a losing of the desire to understand?

Having failed to take our leave, Climacus now tempts our desire for understanding to a higher flight (of fantasy) in proposing to describe 'subjective reflection' in its search back and further into inwardness. 'At its highest, inwardness in an existing subject is passion; truth as a paradox corresponds to passion, and that truth becomes a paradox is grounded precisely in its relation to an existing subject. In this way the one corresponds to the other' (p. 199). This looks suspiciously like an argument: the truth for a subject is the truth of inwardness, inwardness is passion, passion's truth lies in paradox. And we are now 'shown' the ground for this. The 'eternal essential truth' is a paradox for an existing person since their truth would be the object of 'the passion for the infinite'. Inwardness is passion and passion at its highest would constitute the passion for one's life as a whole, so that its object must be *beyond* thought which is itself part of life and so be paradoxical for that thought. Having

established this, Climacus suggests that we can now ask what such a paradox might be at its most extreme form, a 'more inward expression for it'. The eternal truth is a paradox, but that 'The eternal truth has come into existence in time' is 'the absolute paradox' (p. 209), that which is maximally beyond thought. This, then, is the object of the most extreme passion, the truth of religious faith. Yet, at the same time, Climacus inserts the sentence: 'here the certainty (is) that, viewed objectively, it is the absurd, and this absurdity held fast in the passion of inwardness is faith' (p. 210). But this, in terms of what Climacus has said in Part One, is a contradiction, since 'faith' cannot relate itself to anything 'viewed objectively' and so not to 'this absurdity'. In claiming to reveal to us (for our understanding) the movement of 'subjective reflection', Climacus utilizes the vocabulary of *objective* reflection (paradox, absurdity) while at the same time asserting that 'subjective reflection' is opposed to all objective thought. Only in this way can it appear that there is an *argument* here, one to be assessed in disinterested reflection, as if we could, because we are subjects, be shown that the truth we seek lies in 'the absolute paradox' and so in Christianity, which will be identified with it. And Climacus then warns us of the dubiousness of the enterprise: 'here I have . . . latently made an attempt to make clear the necessity of the paradox, and even though the attempt is somewhat weak, it is still something different from speculatively concealing the paradox' (p. 213). Speculative thought *understands* the paradox, since the conception of the God in time as man is for Hegel a product of 'representational thinking' whose truth lies at the telos of the Hegelian dialectic. Climacus's own attempt declines the Hegelian resolution, but leaves the 'paradox' as the product of the form of disinterested thinking which is the apparent argument of CUP, whilst alerting us to the 'weakness' of the attempt and the ambiguity of 'necessity'. The 'necessity' appears to be that of disinterested thinking, the revelation of what was implicit in accepted premises, but at the same time, as concerning the 'subjective' it cannot be. Of course, in the pertinent sense, Climacus *does* reveal the 'necessity' of the 'paradox', namely, as part of the illusion of a 'subjective thinking' which claims to do what mere objective thought cannot. (There is another hint of this in the footnote to p. 200 where Climacus says that the *only way* 'an existing person enters into a relationship with God' is through despair and 'in this way . . . the existing person's postulation of God is – a necessity'. But this 'necessity' is then not

that of thought but of what removes the despair, and so we are bound to ask in what sense this can be called a 'postulate', a notion internal to intellectual reflection.)

The 'absolute paradox' is now identified with Christianity (p. 213), so we appear to have achieved the happy result of an argument that Christianity is the truth for an existing individual, something we have been told since the Introduction is a 'delusion'. And Climacus, having apparently achieved what he set out to prevent, immediately injects a note of hesitation. 'Suppose that Christianity was and wants to be a mystery, an utter mystery . . . Suppose that Christianity does not at all want to be understood', he says, but then promptly tempts us again by expressing this in terms of its being 'a paradox', 'the absurd' (p. 214). But if 'it does not want to be understood and that the maximum of any eventual understanding is to understand that it cannot be understood' (ibid.), then this is not expressed by characterizing it in the categories of the understanding (paradox, the absurd). Doing so allows the impression that one can be argued into accepting the 'necessity' of the paradox and so into accepting Christianity, an inclination which finds its clear expression a little later: 'if . . . subjectivity is truth and subjectivity is the existing subjectivity, then . . . Christianity is a perfect fit. Subjectivity culminates in passion, Christianity is paradox; paradox and passion fit each other perfectly, and paradox perfectly fits a person situated in the extremity of existence' (p. 230). This is the culmination of 'subjective thinking' which results in what has been already characterized as a comic delusion, an argument for the intellectual necessity of faith. The illusion of speculation, that we could be argued into faith, has now been repeated.

5

The appearance of disinterested argumentative rigour is now disrupted by a passionate outburst by Climacus against speculation (p. 234). But in case this should sound too much like 'earnestness', as if he had a world-historical call to combat speculation and announce a 'matchless future', he now proposes to tell us the personal anecdote of how he came to embark on his project of understanding the 'dubious relation' between speculation and Christianity through the quite accidental overhearing of a monologue by an old man to his

grandson in the graveyard. This episode he admits we may well dismiss as fiction. The recounting of the episode is characterized by the features he had earlier attributed to Lessing's style through which it repelled the reader and which indicated to Climacus that Lessing recognized that the religious concerned him *alone*: the undecidable joining of jest and earnestness, the apparent emphasis on the indifferent, and the use of the first-person. This part of the text thus re-introduces the issue of how communication is to take place in respect of the 'dubious relation' at a point in the text where the apparent alternative to speculation, 'subjective thinking', has repeated the objective movement. Climacus, suspecting that speculation's objective interpretation of Christianity is a manifestation of a general malaise, 'that because of much knowledge people have entirely forgotten what it means to *exist* and what *inwardness* is' (p. 242), now raises the question of the character of the appropriate form of communication. It became clear to him, he says, that his presentation must be made in an 'indirect form' (p. 242) and not didactically in the direct communication of results since the latter would simply reinforce the misunderstanding that 'existing consisted in coming to know something about a particular point' (p. 249). But what we have been given before the intrusion into the text of the personal in the form of Climacus's outburst and anecdote has indeed been such 'knowledge', of what it means to exist and its 'truth' in the 'absolute paradox', whilst the internal contradictions have been continuously working against this and the desire which keeps us reading. Since the text we have been reading is itself part of Climacus's communication in regard to the 'dubious relation' we must now be aware that what we have been dealing with is itself in an 'indirect form'. This awareness must now be converted, not into knowledge, but into a reading practice which will *repel* us from the text, *stop* us reading and leave us in a situation where the 'issue' of the religious can really be raised – where we are alone with our lives.

Having broached the issue of a communication which has an 'indirect form', Climacus claims to find it already exemplified in the pseudonymous writings. Here we get the first appendix, 'A Glance at a Contemporary Effort in Danish Literature'. This contains in a footnote, as we have seen, Climacus's explicit account of the nature of his own writing in PF. After this footnote, Climacus in the text of the Appendix goes on to remark that 'my idea of communication

through books is very different from what I generally see presented on the topic and from what is silently taken for granted' and characterizes this conception of communication as a matter of saying 'something to a passerby in passing, without standing still oneself or delaying the other, without wanting to induce him to go the same way, but just urging him to go his own way – such is the relation between an existing person and an existing person when the communication pertains to the truth as existence inwardness' (p. 277). (In respect of the 'identification' of Climacus as a 'humorist', it is noteworthy that in the Conclusion he implicitly contrasts this form of communication with that of the 'humorist': 'Without standing still there is no humor; the humorist always has ample time' (p. 602).) Communication in relation to 'truth as existence inwardness' can only take the form, which Climacus had earlier attributed to Lessing, or freeing the other to go their own way, and so of repelling them from thinking that the 'truth' of their existence is something they are going to find in a book. In the case of Christianity, it is a matter of undermining the assumption that it is to be known, understood in a disinterested manner, and only then accepted or rejected.

The account of the nature of PF given in the footnote, that it is a parody of speculative thought, is borne out by the practice of CUP itself, in the constant contrast between what appears to be the content, the argument in terms of 'subjective thinking' to Christianity as the truth for the existing individual, and the way it is presented. So we can expect this contrast here too in the Appendix where the footnote is there to alert us to the contradictory movement of the text. The writing surrounding the footnote exemplifies what the footnote says and so questions us as to how we are taking this 'communication'. The footnote says that a 'review' of PF is bound to give 'an utterly wrong impression'. PF has the form of an 'indirect communication' and this cannot appear in the direct form of a review of its 'content' since it takes place (if at all) in the unravelling of the contrast between that 'content' and how it is expressed, thereby removing the illusions the reader brought to the text and so freeing her to go her own way. Now, the Appendix concerns itself with the pseudonymous authors, according to Climacus, precisely because they are 'aware of the relation of indirect communication to truth as inwardness': they too share Climacus's conception of 'communication through books' in this matter. So they cannot be reviewed. But

Climacus, prior to the remarks on PF and the indication of his own conception of communication, *does* review them. At the end of the Appendix he apologizes for this, but says that 'my discussion, simply by not becoming involved in the contents, is actually no review' (p. 213). He has, he claims, solely been concerned with their form. This is, however, itself an 'indirect communication', since it is not true and, as we have just read the 'review', we cannot but know that it is not true. He does report the content of the pseudonymous works, and does so as showing us a *necessary* sequence of forms of existence, a quasi-Hegelian dialectic of existence. The pseudonymous books have been said by Climacus at the beginning of the Appendix to present the relation between forms of inwardness in 'existing individualities' (pp. 253, 259) and in this way show that 'there is no conclusion and no final decision' which is 'an indirect expression for truth as inwardness and in this way perhaps a polemic against truth as knowledge' (p. 253). When Climacus presents these relations, *outside* the books and so outside of their form of 'indirect communication' which prevents a 'conclusion', they become something to be 'known', a sequence of 'stages' leading to Christianity as the truth for the existing individual, thus repeating the 'argument' of subjective thinking. The pseudo-Hegelian form his account takes should then alert us to the 'speculative' nature of that 'argument'. The subsequent footnote on PF and the remarks on communication, therefore, should warn us that the 'speculative' form of the sequence is a consequence of abstracting from the indirect form of the books and so shows, indirectly, by thus *failing*, that indeed they cannot be reviewed.⁴

4. The apparent necessary sequence Climacus traces through the pseudonymous books is in brief something like this. In *Either/Or*, the aesthete A is shown thinking he can *live* in possibility, which as existence isn't possibility, is an illusion. Recognizing this, A despairs. Judge William shows that the resolution to this despair lies in the individual 'choosing himself'. Having tried to live in possibility, A must now do what Judge William has done, draw back from possibility and make himself actual by imprinting the very form of the 'I', of himself, upon the contents of his life. In this way, he 'chooses choice itself', and so chooses without reference to externalities: he commits himself, chooses 'for nothing'. But, Climacus says, this makes it appear that A (and Judge William himself) by despair 'without interruption had found himself'. But this is illusory, since 'in despairing, I use myself to despair . . . but if I do this I cannot come back by myself' (p. 258). That is, if you have lived oriented to imagined possibilities, you cannot simply then will for nothing. *You* are not, *ex hypothesi*, a person who can will like that. Hence, in recognizing the ethical demand, you realize your own inadequacy to carry it out. This realization is religious and constitutes the 'teleological suspension of the ethical'. What is recognized is, on

This appearance of a 'necessary' sequence of stages is, however, illusory. It is produced by regarding each form of existence inwardness as containing within itself a 'contradiction' which it cannot itself resolve and which necessitates a move to a higher level. Here, 'necessitates' means that within the terms of the form of existence inwardness concerned reason is to be found for such a move. This reason stems from the teleological drive in terms of which the forms of existence inwardness are characterized, towards Christian existence in which one truly becomes a 'self' from which 'contradiction' is absent. The 'contradictions' are thus a result of the unconscious desire for Christian existence finding inadequate resolutions which are then removed as 'subjectivity' works towards its 'truth'. But this scheme is a result of substituting (illusory) cognitive notions of 'difficulty', 'contradiction' and 'truth' for their existential senses. Existential truth is what one lives, and to take on a new form of existential inwardness involves the existential difficulty of committing oneself ethically or resigning oneself religiously, matters of decisiveness which thus lack reason in terms of one's previous existential condition. It is just this existential difficulty which is removed in the pseudo-Hegelian sequence. Intellectual difficulty is substituted for the difficulty of existing, as if we already desired (but unknow-

the one hand, the 'infinite requirement of the ethical' (p. 267) and, on the other, that one would have to be transformed in oneself in order to live in accordance with it. This suspension of the ethical appears first in *Fear and Trembling* in the story of Abraham. Here (and the Hegelian overtones of this are unmistakable) the 'infinite requirement' appears as 'the truth' of, and so other than, Abraham's ethical obligations, which otherwise he doesn't question he can carry out: 'Abraham was not heterogeneous with the ethical' (p. 267). As their truth, it can require him to act against what otherwise he understood as his obligations, a situation dramatized by the demand that he sacrifice his son. But for us now the teleological suspension appears in a more inward form: 'Duty is the absolute, its requirement the absolute, and yet the individual is prevented from fulfilling it' (p. 267). Having recognized the illusion of the aesthetic, we must 'become who we are' ('choose ourselves'). But we are now forced to realize we cannot do this just because of who we are. Duty as absolute requires willing for nothing, but we are not such as can will for nothing. We can, therefore, recognize the ethical requirement only in a turning inwards to practice renunciation of externalities (what Climacus will call the 'infinite resignation' of Religiousness A in Chapter Four). Christianity now gives us absolution from 'sin', the 'dreadful exemption' due to our 'heterogeneity with the ethical', and so constitutes our 'truth', that existence in which is attained the telos we had been, unknowingly, seeking and which causes the overthrow of the previous forms of existence. What Climacus gives us as the 'content' of the pseudonymous books is an Hegelian dialectic of inwardness, which is just what the philosophical reader, dismayed perhaps by the comedy Part One has made of Hegel, would now like to make of 'subjectivity'.

ingly) ethical commitment or religious passion, and the difficulty lay in realizing this, so that we could arrive in the ethical or religious by intellectual reflection. But it is just this illusion that the doubly-reflected communication of CUP attempts to remove.

6

Chapter Three, 'Actual Subjectivity, Ethical Subjectivity, the Subjective Thinker', now works against what has (apparently) been said, before the personal intervention in the previous chapter, by questioning its *overt form*. 'In the language of abstraction, that which is the difficulty of existence and of the existing person never actually appears; even less is the difficulty explained' (p. 301). Yet it is the language of abstraction in terms of which the difficulty has been articulated and 'explained' in the erection of a theory of 'subjectivity'. This 'subjectivity' is just as much a generality and abstraction as that of the 'human being' of philosophical inquiry: both are the product of a disinterested inquiry into existence. But 'there is only one ethical observing – it is self-observation' (p. 320) which cannot form the contents of a book. 'All existence-issues are passionate . . . To think about them so as to leave out the passion is not to think about them at all' since they are ones which the individual must encounter within her own life. But if this is so, then existence issues are not thought about in the book, and the issue the book began with is, it was stated at the start, such an issue. Which brings us full-circle in chapter four, back to 'The Issue in *Fragments*'.

Christianity today, Climacus says, has become either a matter of custom and habit (we are Christians because we have been baptized, go to church and go through certain rituals) or the subject of intellectual inquiry. Under such circumstances it 'becomes more and more difficult to find a point of departure if one wants to know what Christianity is' (p. 368). The question, of course, is whether that 'point of departure' is to be found in what appears to be the 'content' of PF and CUP or lies not *in* the books but in the disillusioning of a certain kind of reader through the operation of the contradictions, changes of tone, irony and comedy of these texts which opens the reader to hear the Christian requirement *personally* as requiring decision. PF had 'imaginatively constructed' a form of existence going beyond paganism for which 'an eternal happiness is

decided in time by the relation to something historical' and which Climacus now identifies with Christianity (p. 369). However, he immediately says that the question of what Christianity is must not be raised as if it were a philosophical theory but 'in terms of existence' and so it must 'be able to be answered briefly' since 'it would indeed be a ludicrous contradiction if an existing person asked what Christianity is in terms of existence and then spent his whole life deliberating on that – for in that case when should he exist in it?' This, coming on page 370 of a book apparently addressed to that question, is indeed ludicrous. And the appropriateness of the 'imaginative construction' and the analytic discourse of the earlier part of CUP becomes more pressing in the light of a footnote which remarks 'With regard to an existence-communication, existing in it is the maximum and wanting to understand it is a cunning evasion that wants to shirk its task' (p. 371). But it is precisely our desire for understanding which prompts us to read the book.

In all the learned discussions about what Christianity is, Climacus goes on, one never sees the question 'What is Christianity?' 'presented in such a way that one discovers that the person asking about it is asking in terms of existing' (p. 373). If the difficulty is in becoming and being a Christian (that is, in existing in Christianity) then 'it should not even be difficult to understand – namely, to understand in such a way that one can begin with the difficulty – to become a Christian and to be a Christian' (p. 379). Christianity is 'an existence communication' and expresses 'an existence contradiction' (p. 380) and it is 'to express the existence-contradiction of Christianity' that Climacus introduces the issue 'an eternal happiness is decided here in time by a relation to something historical' (p. 381). But this 'introduces' the 'existence contradiction' in the form of a contradiction in *thought* (hence 'the absolute paradox'). But is an 'existence contradiction' such a contradiction? Climacus has only tried to 'introduce' the issue, and he says that, unlike an introduction in matters of thought, there is no direct transition to becoming a Christian from such an introduction: rather there is 'the qualitative leap'. This might sound as if Climacus was simply saying, first we have to understand, then you can act upon it. But he constantly emphasizes that in so far as there is any understanding at issue, there is no difference between the 'simple' and the 'wise person': 'it is not the simple person for whom this introducing can make it difficult to become a Christian' (p. 383). Climacus's introducing makes it 'difficult' for a

certain kind of person (the sort who reads a book like this) and this introducing is by no means what one would have to understand, wise or simple, to engage with the difficulty of Christianity which Climacus has said lies in becoming and being a Christian. Rather, he says, that there is a 'qualitative leap' means that the introduction must be 'repelling', making it difficult to enter what it introduces (p. 381). This 'repulsion points out that (Christianity) is the absolute decision' (p. 384). The introduction as repulsion is a rejection of the demands of the 'wise' that they should first 'understand' in a way which is not available to the 'simple', since for both the issue is whether they will make the 'absolute decision' or not and the difficulty with this does not lie in understanding (it is the requirement to give up everything) but in living it. This kind of 'introduction' operates by beginning where the reader is, with their desire to understand, apparently intending to accommodate it, and then defeating its demand for satisfaction. So the 'issue' through which Christianity is here 'introduced' is immediately articulated in terms of an explicit contradiction which defeats the desire to understand: 'The individual's happiness is decided in time through a relation to something historical that furthermore is historical in such a way that its composition includes that which according to its nature cannot become historical and consequently must become that by virtue of the absurd' (p. 385). The individual's happiness is decided by a relation to something which both is historical and cannot be. Climacus has just said that the introduction of the 'issue' is to be repelling and the repulsion points out that Christianity is the 'absolute decision'. He now emphasizes what that means: a person relates to an 'eternal happiness' only if it absolutely transforms his existence for him. If 'there is something he is not willing to give up for its sake, then he is not relating himself to an eternal happiness' (p. 397) – as, for example, if he is not willing to give up his desire for the sort of understanding CUP apparently promises. The contradiction repels the one who desires understanding and points towards what the absolute decision would require here, namely giving up the demand of the reader that Christianity be something to be understood in a way available only to the 'wise'. Christianity as existence communication requires us to venture all, and so live for nothing, an existence form Christianity calls 'love'. The existence contradiction lies in our being unable to take on this existence form, since we exist, at the time we encounter the existence communication, in

terms of human relativities, and yet it is the requirement the Christian must accept. The contradiction is existential: if we accept the requirement, we recognize that we should exist in an existence form we cannot ourselves bring about. To express this in the form of a contradiction in thought is a confusion of categories.

And it is here that Climacus 'identifies' himself as a 'humorist' who 'comprehends' but does not himself live in terms of Christianity. We have seen above Climacus's explicit account of the 'humorist'. But in the light provided by the *movement* of the text, we can read this reference to 'comprehension' itself humorously, since it amounts to the understanding that Christianity as the absolute decision rejects the demand for understanding and the evasions of intellectual inquiry. When Climacus then says that the humorist 'comprehends the profundity, but at the same time it occurs to him that it most likely is not worth the trouble to become involved in explaining it. This revocation is the jest' (p. 448), we can read underneath the surface meaning, provided by Climacus's explicit account of the humorist, to the humorous expression ('not worth the trouble') for recognizing that Christianity declines the demand for explanation just because it is the absolute decision, requiring that one 'venture everything' (and so without a 'why'). The 'revocation' is the apparent offer of explanation and then its withdrawal which leaves the one who desires understanding simply with their personal relationship with the decision.

In the remainder of Chapter Four, Climacus repeatedly offers us something to understand only then to render this impossible. Having distinguished between religiousness A, that of 'inward deepening', and religiousness B, that of relation to the 'absolute paradox', he immediately emphasizes that what is specific for Christianity is 'not a task for thinking' and promptly revokes the entire enterprise: 'But one does not prepare oneself to become aware of Christianity by reading books or by world-historical surveys, but by immersing oneself in existing. Any other preliminary study is bound *eo ipso* to end in a misunderstanding. The difficulty is not to understand what Christianity is but to become and to be a Christian' (p. 559). This refusal of understanding is once again formulated in terms of the 'paradox', but now in a form which questions itself. 'The misunderstanding continually consists in the delusion that the incomprehensibility of the paradox is supposed to be connected with the difference' between good and poor minds (p. 566). But if

Christianity is a relation to 'the paradox', then perceiving it as 'paradox' would certainly depend on such a difference. A paradox is for the understanding. But, Climacus goes on, one 'cannot believe nonsense against the understanding . . . because the understanding will penetratingly perceive that it is nonsense and hinder him in believing it, but he uses the understanding so much that through it he becomes aware of the incomprehensible, and now, believing, he relates himself to it against the understanding' (p. 568). The paradox has been described in terms of no-sense, that is a contradiction, but this is now apparently to be distinguished by the understanding itself from nonsense, yet in such a way that there can be in this no difference between the 'wise' and the 'simple'. What Climacus is offering us is the continual attempt to intellectualize the existential requirement that Christianity is as an existence communication: to formulate in terms of the desire to understand what cannot be understood, not because there is the 'paradox' which can't be understood (but can be understood as the paradox), but because Christianity is the existence communication which requires us to 'venture everything' and so without a reason. Christ calls us to give up everything and follow Him, who is 'The Way, the Truth and the Life'. At the end of Chapter Four, Climacus embarks on the project of articulating this as 'a relation that runs directly counter to all thinking' (p. 570). Formulated in this way, the relation involves two 'dialectical contradictions' – 'first, basing one's eternal happiness on the relation to something historical, and then that this historical is constructed contrary to all thinking' (p. 579). We cannot base our 'eternal happiness' on 'something historical' since the latter is something we can know (to the extent we can) only in a relation of disinterest, whereas the significance of our lives is not something we can relate to in disinterest. The object of faith, Christ, cannot then be an object of historical knowledge, but this now gets expressed in the claim that He must then be 'historical' in a way 'contrary to all thinking'. Climacus tries to articulate this 'unthinkability' in terms of the relation to the object of faith as being not one to a 'possibility', the field of the thinkable, but to 'actuality', that the god Christ, was born, lived and died like any human being (p. 581). However, this isn't the relating to a particular as the *actualizing* of a possibility, since the object of faith *cannot* be understood as possibility. But then, nor can it be a relation to 'actuality' in the terms Climacus is using here, since this notion depends on that of 'possibility'. If one says that one

cannot say that it is a 'possibility' that Christ, the son of God, existed, this is just a misleading way of marking that one's relation to Christ is either that you believe (that is, accept the existence communication which is the life of Christ) or you reject Christianity. To say the object of faith is 'constituted contrary to all thinking' is again a misleading way of saying that Christianity is, as an existence communication, something which you accept or reject, matters of decision and not understanding, and that this decision concerns the existence communication which requires us to 'venture all' and so without reason. The 'dialectical contradictions' result from trying to formulate what is not a matter of the understanding, as requiring decision in relation to the existential requirement to venture all, as if it were *incomprehensible*. But, then, in order to distinguish this from the everyday notion of incomprehensibility, that of contradiction or of what is not yet understood, notions relative to that of comprehension, it is said to be incomprehensible in some 'absolute' sense. But any notion of incomprehensibility is relative to, takes its sense from, its relation to that of comprehensibility. The 'absolute' sense is an illusion, and one Climacus wishes us to recognize as such when at the end of the chapter he says that 'sin', consciousness of which characterizes the Christian, 'is no teaching or doctrine for thinkers . . . It is an existence category and simply cannot be thought' (p. 585).

The later stages of the chapter continually incite our desire to understand, defeat it, saying we have to deal with the incomprehensible, and then interjecting warnings against the enterprise we are embarked on (the humorous, the rejection of introducing Christianity by a book, and so on). There is no doctrine here, only the continual attempt to prevent our desire to construe it as a matter for understanding finding even the illusion of satisfaction.

7

In the final appendix, as we've seen, Climacus revokes the book. He writes for the 'imagined reader' who 'can understand that the understanding is a revocation'. To understand the book is to revoke it. But such a reader 'can understand that to write a book and to revoke it is not the same as refraining from writing it' (p. 621) since the point of the book is to provoke the understanding that is the revocation. The

book aims to dispel the illusion the reader is in who *desires to read the book*, one which ostensibly raises the question 'How to be a Christian'. Such a person is under the illusion that this is something which requires a disinterested inquiry to establish as a preliminary to determining what attitude to take to it. The strategy of the book is to go through the motions of such an inquiry in such a way that it is *unreadable*, to go along with the desire to understand in order to undermine it. It becomes possible then for such a reader to revoke the book in the realization that the issue cannot be presented like this, in a book, but faces one in one's own life, as it does too the 'simple' who would have no desire to read the book, in the requirement to 'venture everything', where the difficulty is not to understand but to live in it – if one wills.

The 'truth' of life for an individual is a matter of 'existence inwardness', something to live in. This notion of truth has a corresponding sense of 'illusion', namely where self-understanding is at odds with the way an individual lives, a form of self-deception. Self-deception cannot be removed by a direct communication that the person's self-description doesn't apply to them, for their self-understanding is that it does. The deception would have to be removed by the person concerned and therefore in a way which altered the way they saw themselves. Communication directed towards such an illusion must initially embrace it, begin from where the individual is in self-understanding.⁵ In the case of PF and CUP, the immediate audience is of intellectual and cultured individuals who either think they are Christians because they have some intellectual account to give of it which they claim to believe, or who think they would become Christians if only such an account could be given. The 'issue' is posed in CUP as a necessary preliminary for the question of faith to arise, and it is posed in a form which invites intellectual inquiry. The intellectual accounts the audience is likely to 'believe', the historical and philosophical, are undermined in Part One by contrasting our disinterested relation to such results of

5. This is why Kierkegaard uses the pseudonyms. To dispel an illusion, it must first be assumed. But Kierkegaard himself does not live in the illusions, and so they must be assumed in another guise. 'One will perceive the significance of the pseudonyms and why I must be pseudonymous in relation to all aesthetic productions, because I led my life in entirely different categories and understood from the beginning that this productivity was of an interim nature, a deceit, a necessary process of elimination' (*The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, ed. B. Nelson, Harper, 1962, pp. 85–6).

intellectual inquiry with the essentially personal relation required by the issue of faith which is concerned with the meaning of the individual's life. But this opens up a new field of temptation for the desire to understand, since it now appears as if a theory of subjectivity, of the 'personal', is needed for understanding the 'issue' of 'How to become a Christian'. Following this trail, our desire is led to its defeat, to explicit nonsense (the 'incomprehensibility' that is 'absolute', and not merely the not yet understood or an ordinary contradiction, of the 'dialectical contradictions'), in a text which continually disrupts the appearance of argumentative rigour, culminating in the final revocation. In this way, the communication is 'double reflected', presenting the reader with the dialectical knot of the contrast between apparent content and form which they themselves must unravel. In doing so, the illusion they have been under is revealed to themselves by themselves, the only way self-deception can be dispelled. In revoking the book, we understand it, since we recognize that the 'issue' of becoming a Christian is not raised in this or any book but in existence, in our lives, in facing the requirement to 'venture all'. And then we understand ourselves, that we are not Christians, if we thought we were because of some intellectual account we possessed of it, or that we are not potential Christians, if we thought we might become Christian if only the right account were forthcoming. CUP does no more than dispel this illusion, that the issue is one that can be presented in a book like this, since to desire to do more is itself a mark of illusion. CUP leaves us where we were, but where we did not know we were, alone with our lives and with what we make of them. The communication of CUP is 'indirect' in the sense that it takes place only in the reader recognizing their illusion, the one that kept them reading, so that 'what' is communicated is not, in that sense, *in* the book. As Climacus warns us, the 'matter of indirect communication' cannot be formulated in direct statement for 'haste is worthless in understanding when the inwardness is the understanding' (p. 278). The role of the commentator cannot be, therefore, to 'review' such a book through a digest and criticism of 'content', but only to try to make clear its strategy.

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