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## Chapter 5: Possibility in Kierkegaard's imaginative discourses

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Belief and doubt are not two different types of knowledge that can be determined in continuity with each other, because neither of them is a cognitive act; they are opposite passions.

-Johannes Climacus, *Philosophical Crumbs*, 1843-4<sup>1</sup>

From what does pure thinking abstract? From existence, consequently from what it is supposed to explain.

-Johannes Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Crumbs*, 1846<sup>2</sup>

When Lukács includes Kierkegaard's imaginary diaries and short stories in his pantheon of the great 'essays of life' one cannot help but think that Kierkegaard would have been pleased to find himself in the company of 'Plato's *Dialogues*, the texts of the mystics, [and] Montaigne's *Essays*' (1974, p. 3). Certainly, Kierkegaard saw himself as a Socrates for his age, and a brief glance at his pseudonyms – Johannes de Silentio, Johannes Climacus, Anti-Climacus – reveals the influence of the Christian mystical tradition on his writings. Though scholars disagree about the level of Kierkegaard's direct engagement with Montaigne,<sup>3</sup> the similarities in form and sceptical method are undeniable. Yet Kierkegaard's writings also stand apart from the rest of the cited authors in his use of pseudonyms and fictional characters to advance his ideas. Might this move into the literary disqualify Kierkegaard as a philosophical essayist? As Lukács reminds us, essayistic writings as such already involve a literary element, which he calls, by turns, art or poetry—defined by a concern with the form of the text that is not shared by the scientific neutrality to which he opposes the artistic.<sup>4</sup> Claire de Obaldia argues further that the 'occasional', polyphonic, and anti-systematic nature of the essay leads to the historical development of the novel, which transforms the multiple voices of a singular writing 'I' into fully-fledged fictional

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<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 84.

<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 328.

<sup>3</sup> See Grimsley (1966) and Landkildehus (2009) for more on Kierkegaard's engagement with Montaigne. Grimsley makes a stronger case for Kierkegaard's close study of the *Essais*, especially 'Apology for Raimond Sebond', while Landkildehus interprets the existing evidence to suggest that Kierkegaard was a more casual reader of Montaigne. Both acknowledge the similarities of theme and form in the two authors.

<sup>4</sup> While Lukács's distinction between the scientific and the artistic on the level of *form* is convincing, his too-neat division of artistic creation and the scientific truth both makes too little of the artist's claim to truth and too much of the scientist's, as Adorno notes in 'Essay as Form'. Lukács claims that although the essay is of necessity artistic or poetic, it is nevertheless distinguished from art by its concern with linking life as lived to life as such, moving from occasions and concrete images to the 'true life of the soul' or the 'ultimate questions'. However, Lukács fails to appreciate that this same dynamic can be operative in any example of poetic or pictorial representation.

characters, dialogues, and situations. In their wholly imaginative frame, novels are a natural extension of the essay's refusal to resolve in advance different ways of seeing. Schlegel's *Lucinde* and Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* were experimental novels of ideas that staged the philosophical insights of German Romanticism in a dramatic way, offering an imaginative mode of reader engagement. Kierkegaard's quasi-novelistic writings take part in this tradition of literary-philosophical hybrids that seem calculated to defy classification. By creating fictional 'authors' who embody particular life views, Kierkegaard advances existing strands of the essayistic, particularly polyvocality. The multiplicity of voices and the profusion of ironic, disjunctive structures within his texts furthers the anti-systematic, sceptical agenda of the texts we have already studied.

Kierkegaard is well-known for his critique of 'the System'—a term that targets Hegelian idealism and the metaphysical tradition more broadly in its tendency to privilege being over existence or becoming, or to cover over the gap between the two. Like Montaigne and Hume, Kierkegaard worries that the temporal structure of everyday life is suppressed by certain ways of speaking (philosophically), that the imposition of a conceptual structure onto lived experience can distort what one sets out to understand. Kierkegaard's stated aim of combatting the System 'by means of form' (1985, p. 117) works by exploiting the literary possibilities of the essayistic in order to gesture toward those features of existence that escape conceptualisation: possibility, the particular or subjective, and religious faith. Like the other authors in this study, especially the *Frühromantiker* who (along with 18<sup>th</sup>-century ironists such as Lessing and Hamann) inspired his ironic-polemical tone, Kierkegaard took form to be a matter of the utmost concern for the project of philosophy, seeing the choice of presentation as both an assertion of the conditions under which philosophy ought to begin and, implicitly, an ethical judgement of whether and how the truth can be learned or communicated. Kierkegaard emphatically rejects the notion that philosophical truth ought to be neutral or indifferent to the individual in the manner of scientific truth; like the great essayists and *moralistes* who precede him, he affirms that a subject's knowledge of himself in relation to his own historical moment – including existing conventions, structures, and texts – must form the basis for philosophical enquiry. Likewise, he rejects objective or neutral discourse, the discourse of disembodied, de-subjectivised authority, which covers over communication as a problem and denies the hermeneutic insight that all communication is *interested*, defined in advance by the cultural parameters of language use and by the commitments of an individual author/reader. For Kierkegaard as for the *Frühromantiker*, a philosophical writer who fails to recognise these commitments is left in a default position of

dogmatism,<sup>5</sup> an offence for which he takes 19<sup>th</sup>-century Hegelian philosophy to task. Kierkegaard turns away from the project of establishing objective truth, the truth of ‘the System’, and instead asks the question of the significance of truth for the finite, existing subject, the ancient question of the value of knowledge for life. Rather than accept the false transcendence of abstraction or speculation, which achieves the eternal by removing the subject from time, he attempts to clear the way for a genuine opening or transcendence within the everyday.

### **Doubt and faith**

Kierkegaard is a writer preoccupied with the consequences of a tendency in both philosophy and in the prevailing religious attitudes of his time to ignore what it means to exist, to ignore the subject as a possibility to be realised. In the preface to *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard, writing under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, mounts an attack against those who would attempt to ‘go further’ than doubt or faith. He attributes this desire to ‘go further’ to a failure to appreciate the difficulty of both doubt and faith in the contemporary intellectual and cultural climate of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Denmark, which he describes as a ‘regular clearance sale’ of ideas (1994, p. 3). He saw a culture of scientific optimism, quick to treat the problems of philosophy and religion as if they had already been worked out and needed just ‘one more stone’<sup>6</sup> or one more commentary to reach completion; perhaps next Sunday the System – the total understanding of subject and world – would be finished (1992, p. 106).<sup>7</sup> In a move that is typical of Kierkegaard’s approach to philosophical questions, de Silentio translates the question of doubting to the level of the individual and asks how doubt is ever to be overcome – or even entered into – by the existential subject. Posing the same question about faith, de Silentio remarks, ‘Even though one were capable of converting the whole content of faith into the form of a concept, it does not follow that one has adequately conceived faith and understands how one got into it, or how it got into one’ (*Ibid.*). The equivalence of doubt and faith that runs through the preface, though

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<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard’s rejection of the possibility of neutral discourse also takes to heart Jacobi’s suggestion that non-conceptual conviction is a precondition for orienting oneself in the world, since it is only this kind of basic interest or passion that allows one to break free from the infinite regress of rational reflection.

<sup>6</sup> In the preface to *Johannes Climacus*, the unnamed author declares, ‘Someone who supposes that philosophy has never in all the world been so close as it is now to fulfilling its task of explaining all mysteries may certainly think it strange, affected, and scandalous that I choose the narrative form and do not in my small way hand up a stone to culminate the system’ (Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 117).

<sup>7</sup> As a religious thinker, Kierkegaard specifically rejected the notion that one could be born into the Christian faith by virtue of being born in a Christian country (Denmark), as opposed to ‘working out [one’s] salvation in fear and trembling’. The immediate philosophical target of de Silentio’s remarks is H.L. Martensen, a prominent Danish Hegelian who taught that the Hegelian dialectic represented a triumph over doubt, thus reducing scepticism to a mere moment in the system; within this framework, ‘going further’ was conceived as integral to the practice of philosophy. See H.L. Martensen’s review of J.L. Heiberg’s ‘Introductory Lectures to Speculative Logic’, *Danske Maanedskrift*, No. 16 for 1836, pp. 515ff. For a discussion of Kierkegaard’s critique of Martensen, see Stewart, 2003, pp. 261ff.

never explicitly stated, is a significant rhetorical feature. De Silentio begins by considering the philosophical cheapening of doubt as an intellectual curiosity rather than a way of inhabiting the world, and proceeds to take up parallel discussion of faith in the same terms. The rationale for treating doubt and faith as twin movements is hardly self-evident from a philosophical perspective, since the foil of doubt is generally imagined to be certainty, certain knowledge. What Neil Gascoigne terms the ‘heroic’ response to scepticism purports to dispel sceptical doubt by establishing an ultimate ground for knowledge claims either in some rational principle or in direct access to sense data;<sup>8</sup> the assumption is that the problem of doubt could be solved by agreement on the proper criteria of justification.

De Silentio’s performative aim in treating doubt and faith as interchangeable is to suggest that the philosophical understanding of doubt as a problem of knowledge is hopelessly skewed: the way to recover from doubt is not through more certain knowledge, nor through the progressive acquisition of knowledge, but through the twin movement of acknowledgement of the inevitable fracture between thought and being, and faith or radical openness, akin to Jacobi’s *salto mortale*. Moreover, it is suggested that rather than ‘going further’ than doubt, we (readers) would be wise to attempt doubting in earnest. De Silentio admires Descartes and the ancient sceptics, for whom doubting was not only an achievement but also the task of a lifetime, requiring constant renewal in the face of what Kierkegaard in his journals describes as ‘the inveiglements of cognition’ (1985, p. 262/Pap. IV B 10: 18 *n.d.*).<sup>9</sup>

As Danish bishops such as Kierkegaard’s former tutor H.L. Martensen were claiming victory over religious doubt as a mastered historical moment, as Hegel had done for scepticism, De Silentio proclaims that he ‘has not understood the System, does not know whether it actually exists, whether it is completed’ and insists that his own text ‘has nothing whatever to do with the System.’<sup>10</sup> He denies readers a conceptual treatment of doubt or faith that would add to their

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<sup>8</sup> Hegel, influenced by the *Frühromantik* critiques of idealism, saw the absolute principle as progressive, as the end toward which philosophy would strive, rather than something given at the beginning. But unlike the Romantics, he conceived of this end of absolute knowing as not only achievable but logically necessary.

<sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard takes up this subject in his 1842-1843 journals, the period during which he was composing *Johannes Climacus*, his most targeted treatment of sceptical doubt. ‘It was life’s task to keep on doubting despite all the inveiglements of cognition. Therefore, in a certain sense they were never finished [...] it is different when this doubting everything is supposed to be the beginning’ (1992, p. 262). In an journal entry from the same period, Kierkegaard indirectly accuses philosophy of trying to wheedle its way out of the anxiety of doubt: ‘has Descartes done it for all of us in the same way that Christ was crucified?’ (1985, p. 246/Pap. IV B 2: 16).

<sup>10</sup> This remark should be read in light of Johannes Climacus’ critique of Hegel in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: ‘[I]f the conclusion is lacking at the end, it is also lacking at the beginning [...] but if the conclusion is lacking at the beginning, this means that there is no system. A house can indeed be finished even though a bell pull is lacking, but in a scholarly construction the lack of a conclusion has retroactive power to make the beginning doubtful and hypothetical, that is, unsystematic’ (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 13).

knowledge and instead asks the question of what is at stake for the subject in these positions, or rather, *movements*. The worry with both doubt and faith is that one mistakenly tries to ‘quantify oneself into’ them and so changes what must be continually renewed ‘into something else, into another kind of certainty’ (1992, p. 11). In a move that is indicative of Kierkegaard’s turn toward the subject as possibility, *De Silentio* aims to ‘raise the price’ of both doubt and faith by using a variety of rhetorical means to present them as live existential possibilities.

### **‘Interested’ communication**

The treatment of doubt and faith as poles of the same existential activity – which is consistent across the pseudonymous works and the journals – gives Kierkegaard’s writing a therapeutic shape. While his writings do not, like the therapy of the ancient Pyrrhonians, recommend falling back on the conventional practices of the everyday, or living ‘naturally’, both Kierkegaardian and Pyrrhonian therapy work to disabuse readers of the notion that there is any conceptual or philosophical solution to the question: when does one know enough to *really* know? Put another way, Kierkegaard shares with Pyrrhonism the insight that knowledge is inadequate to address the problem of how to orient oneself in the world.

Kierkegaard – both in the journals and through his meta-pseudonym Johannes Climacus – accepts the basic sceptical argument that positive knowledge claims are ultimately groundless, since ‘sense certainty’ is a ‘delusion’ (1992, p. 81) and, as Jacobi had argued, foundationalism does not offer a way of halting the infinite regress of rational reflection (*Ibid.*, p. 116, pp. 328ff). As a result, suspension or withholding of judgement is the only rational conclusion of philosophical investigation. Climacus adds to these critiques his own thesis that positive knowledge claims – sense certainty, historical knowledge, or speculative knowledge – are illusory because they ‘fail to express the state of the knowing subject in existence’ (1992, p. 81). Climacus’s objection centres on the temporal dimension of subjectivity as explored by Montaigne and the Romantics: the subject never exists as a fully realised actuality, is never fully present to itself, but *is* only in the process of becoming. Positive knowledge claims, which assert a truth about being or what *is*, thus stand in contradiction with the negative state of becoming that characterises subjectivity. In order to claim certain knowledge of anything<sup>11</sup>, one must transform oneself into a ‘fictitious object subject, and to mistake oneself for such a subject is to be fooled and to remain fooled’ (1992, p. 81). Transforming the I of the existing subject into an I

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<sup>11</sup> Climacus makes an exception for the claim ‘I exist’, which he finds consistent with subjectivity, but asserts that one cannot extrapolate from this claim a speculative I or a necessary I as various species of idealism attempted to do (1992, p. 81).

that is an object for itself (an object for thought) is precisely the error for which Novalis and the *Frühromantiker* criticise Fichtean idealism;<sup>12</sup> this error is perpetuated in any system that locates its ground in the I of self-reflection but forgets that self-reflection is a process of ‘reciprocal determination [*Wechselbeweis*]<sup>13</sup> and so forgets that the I is always doubled, never self-identical.<sup>14</sup> The consequence of the non-identical, deferred status of the I for the *Frühromantiker* is that any hope of a closed philosophical system must be replaced with infinite striving or infinite approximation toward a poetic-philosophical Book of Books made of accumulated fragments. Kierkegaard is in some ways more radical – and far less optimistic – than his Romantic forebears, displacing the hope for a supreme Work with a more resolutely negative literary strategy of taking away knowledge, leading his readers to *aporia*. Infinite striving remains an apt characterisation of the subject’s position, but in Kierkegaard this requires a rupture from philosophy and an opening toward faith.

As we have already seen, the Romantics developed a heterogeneous ‘system of fragments’ to represent the necessarily open-ended structure of existence. Rhetorically, they used irony as a way of resisting the ‘urge to unity’ that would smooth over the real differences between the absolute and the existing subject. Kierkegaard too develops his style with the aim of keeping alive the tension of possibility and striving that defines existence. In praise of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century playwright and philosopher (and notorious ironist) Lessing, Kierkegaard’s Climacus declares that ‘Lessing and the systematician,<sup>15</sup> both speak of a continued striving—the only difference is that Lessing is obtuse or truthful enough to call it a continued striving, the systematician sagacious and untruthful enough to call it a system’ (1992, p. 108). To better illustrate the bad faith existential position of the systematician, Climacus offers a joke about a man who loses a silk umbrella and, in order to have the best chances of reclaiming it, advertises that he has lost a cotton umbrella instead. Climacus provides his own gloss on the joke: perhaps the ‘systematising’ philosopher hopes to sell more copies by advertising his work as an ‘absolute system’ rather than what it really is: the attempt at or approximation of a system.<sup>16</sup> In this case the parable is an odd fit, since the man with the missing umbrella advertises something cheaper than what he actually owns, whereas the philosopher advertises something more than he is able to deliver. However, it must be borne in mind that for Kierkegaard the object of greater worth is

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<sup>12</sup> Novalis, 1978, II: p. 9

<sup>13</sup> Schlegel, KFSÄ XVIII, 1963, p. 518: 16

<sup>14</sup> ‘*Principien sind immer im Plural, konstruieren sich unter einander; nie nur Eins, wie die Grundwüthigen wähnen*’ (KFSÄ XVIII, 2006, p. 395: 105).

<sup>15</sup> Kierkegaard does not give his ‘systematician’ a name, but Hegel, or some contemporary Danish Hegelian, is the most likely target.

<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard had come to the same conclusion as F. Schlegel: ‘*Jedes System ist nur Approximation seines Ideals. Die ‘Skepsis ist ewig*’ (KFSÄ XVIII, 2006, p. 417: 1149).

not 'the System' but the continual striving of the existing subject. Read on this level the systematic philosopher has 'lost' himself and has erroneously tried to recover the subjectivity that he has lost by transforming it into a speculative 'I-I'; the latter is much 'cheaper' and requires far less effort than the task of becoming or realising oneself in existence, for 'to think abstractly is easier than to exist' (1992, p. 308). The joke is an illustration of the danger of systematic thought that replaces what it sets out to explain with an inferior substitute. The very terms of the investigation ensure that the object sought will never be recovered.

For Kierkegaard as for Jacobi and the Romantics, non-conceptual conviction or what Kierkegaard calls interest [*Interesse*] is a precondition for acting in the world. Scepticism itself is, for Kierkegaard, a version of the *interested* commitment exemplified by faith. In his 1842-1843 journals, he distinguishes between ignorance, uncertainty, and doubt in order to establish the element of willing in doubt and to suggest that doubt, properly understood, cannot be insulated from the sphere of practical action. Doubt is described as 'a higher element of uncertainty' in that 'I determine my relation to a thing—[and] I do not determine it in uncertainty' (1985, p. 262). As a decisive orientation, doubting implies responsibility for my own possibility, giving meaning to contingency. 'Doubt is the beginning of the ethical, for as soon as I am to act, the interest lies with me inasmuch as I assume the responsibility and thereby acquire significance' (*Ibid*, p. 265). As it relates to communication, this insight leads to the conclusion that the object of philosophical writing is not to provide knowledge or to guarantee the truth of what is said by the elaboration of a method; rather, it is to address the subject's relationship or commitment to what is known. For 'even if the system were absolutely perfect, even if the actuality [*Virkelighed*] exceeded the advance reports, doubt would still not be overcome – it only begins – for doubt is based on interest, and all systematic knowledge is disinterested' (1992, p. 170).<sup>17</sup> This focus on the subjective and on doubt as an expression of interest is meant as a reaction against the notion that sceptical doubt could be overcome by a more philosophically rigorous process of justification that would ensure that one were 'getting reality right'. In opposition to this tendency, Kierkegaard's rhetorical strategy often takes the form of Socratically leading his readers *to* doubt, since doubt at the very least requires staking one's claim, which for Kierkegaard is the precondition for any kind of genuine philosophical or ethical engagement.

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<sup>17</sup> See *Johannes Climacus*: 'In this respect he considered the conduct of the Greek sceptics far more consistent than the modern overcoming of doubt. They were well aware that doubt is based on interest, and therefore with perfect consistency they thought they could cancel doubt by transforming it into apathy (*ataraxia*). In this method there was a consistency, whereas it was an inconsistency [...] that motivated modern philosophy to want to conquer doubt systematically. Even if the system were absolutely perfect, even if the actuality [*Virkelighed*] exceeded the advance reports, doubt would still not be overcome – it only begins – for doubt is based on interest, and all systematic knowledge is disinterested' (1992, p. 170).



As the pseudonymous Climacus explores in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the gap between a neutral mathematical proposition such as  $2+2=4$  and an account of existence is a gap of interest, of something at stake for the subject; thus in the latter case, ‘the object of communication is consequently not a knowledge but a realisation’ (1967, p. 272: 649). The question of the *how* of truth raised by essayistic writing and, more proximately, by Jacobi and the German Romantic tradition, is paramount for Kierkegaard and his task of making readers aware of the commitments that shape their way of being in and interrogating the world. The same concerns about the existential *significance* of truth that led the Romantics to reject a *Grundsatz* for philosophy and to orient themselves toward a whole<sup>18</sup> leads Kierkegaard to emphasise the subjective appropriation of truth. Both recognised that idealism – in the case of the Romantics, that of Fichte and Reinhold, and in Kierkegaard’s case that of Hegel – sacrificed an existential subject for a conceptual I, unwittingly giving up on the possibility of a philosophy grounded in and able to address itself to the existing person and unwittingly eliminating freedom or possibility. ‘For Kierkegaard, metaphysics, ethics, and theology – in short the length and breadth of the “onto-theo-logic” – shatter against the rocks of [subjective] “interest”’ (Caputo, 1987, p. 33).<sup>19</sup> The unity and coherence that Fichte and Hegel were able to achieve was for their critics nothing more than a philosophical sleight of hand; the ethical-aesthetic project of *Bildung* – in Kierkegaard the project of *opbyggelige* (edifying or upbuilding) – sought to redress this wrong with a philosophy that would acknowledge the open structure of existence and its absolute difference from conceptual thought.

### **Plurality and irony**

Kierkegaard realises the literary possibilities of the essayistic mode, developing the characteristic multiplicity of perspectives and voices into fully-fledged fictional characters—both his pseudonyms and the fictional characters within his works. The shift from discursive writing to fictional narratives is an example of the continuum of possibilities for essayistic writing and the ease with which the imaginative consideration of different points of view in authors such as Montaigne and Hume can be developed into novelistic techniques. Though Kierkegaard is the first of the authors examined in this study to use pseudonymous characters,<sup>20</sup> his motive for this development is familiar. Montaigne featured as a character in his essays in order to show the non-identity of the individual subject. The heterogeneous unity of the Romantic fragments was

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<sup>18</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>19</sup> See *Repetition*, 2009, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> As noted in the beginning of this chapter, Schlegel and Novalis had already experimented with writing philosophical novels.

an attempt to represent the successive unfolding of truth for the subject in time. Kierkegaard's pseudonymous characters allow for a polyphony of voices and a heterogeneity of perspectives on the same themes of non-identity and temporal existence. Furthering the Romantic move to combat the '*Trieb nach Einbeit*' (Schlegel, KF 103) or the appeal to objective authority by removing an author, Kierkegaard invents multiple authors, multiple personalities, none of whom claim any final authority. His richly conceived pseudonyms are an example of the focus on the subject as the site of truth; through heterogeneous perspectives, Kierkegaard raises the question, not of how we can know enough to be sure of what we know, but of how we come to see the world under a certain aspect, as well as how we might learn to see in a new way.

Each of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms speaks in the first person, enacting his commitment to placing 'I's into the middle of life' since it is 'completely lacking in our age for someone to say: I' (1967, p. 302: 656/Pap. VIII. 2 B 88 *n.d.*). Yet it would be a mistake to read the pseudonyms as embodiments of stable identities or fixed ways of life, e.g. the aesthetic, ethical, and religious. Rather, in every case, Kierkegaard uses the pseudonyms to explore a certain kind of movement: the possibility of becoming other than one is, which is a live possibility for the subject qua subject. Kierkegaard is above all a philosopher of becoming, for whom timeless, eternal categories such as identity can be of use only to logic, not to the existing subject.

As long as I live in time, the principle of identity is only an abstraction. Therefore nothing is easier than to delude oneself and others into thinking the identity of all by abandoning diversity. Nevertheless, one might ask such a person how he conducts himself with regard to living, since in identity I am beyond time [...] The confusion arises only from living in categories different from those used in writing books—O wretched book-writing! (1967, p. 329: 705)

The concerns about identity in this passage – both the identity that comes from transforming a subject into an object 'beyond time' through reifying reflection, and the dangerous urge to unify everything in thought by ignoring difference – resonate with those of the essayists we have already considered. As a means of combatting philosophy's tendency to abandon diversity and think everything under the category of an *eidōs*, Kierkegaard adopts a rhetorical strategy of plunging the reader into the tension of temporal life and becoming through the use of conflicting perspectives (within and across works) and through gestures of ironic reflexivity. The inherent comedy of writing books to combat book writing does not escape Kierkegaard, who sometimes suggests that keeping silent would be the best response of all. Yet his version of 'book writing' is an attempt to maintain difference and to heighten, rather than level out, a sense of the self as possibility. The dialectical movements within each text strain the boundaries of how each pseudonymous author understands himself. As the characters end up revealing the

limitations of their own perspectives, the reader is given a model for transformative self-reflection. Though Kierkegaard's ultimate aim as an author is to open the possibility of Christian truth,<sup>21</sup> this takes place primarily through negative gestures of subtraction or breaking down, which strip away the illusions of self-presence and certainty that prevent genuine opening or transcendence.

The novelistic strategy of fictional characters involves what Kierkegaard describes as an ethical deception—a kind of lie that tells the truth or can lead to the truth. “To deceive into the truth.” [...] Ethical communication in character begins with placing a “deception” in between [the teacher and the learner], and the art consists in enduring everything while remaining faithful to character in the deception and faithful to the ethical’ (Kierkegaard, 1967, 1: p 288: 24). The development of characters that do not represent the author's actual position but that may be able to help the reader to a moment of recognition reflects Kierkegaard's heightened awareness of the hazards of communication, and written communication in particular. He conceives of communication as an art, in which truth or untruth resides in the form.<sup>22</sup> For Kierkegaard, in addition to the dangers of language, which as the medium of the universal threatens to erase the particular, an author faces the additional difficulty that ‘there is really nothing people want to do more than to mimic’ (1967, p. 274: 649: 24). In order to make philosophical writing existentially significant for the reader, Kierkegaard resorts to the art of irony, championed by the *Frühromantiker*.

Romantic irony, as it relates to the practice of writing, denotes gestures of self-consciousness or self-reflection in which an author goes beyond the established frame of the work. Texts like *Tristram Shandy* or *Don Quixote* that constantly comment on their own composition are frequently cited by the Romantics as the paradigm of romantic or ironic writing. The ability to abstract from one's immediate circumstances is considered a measure of aesthetic and intellectual refinement. In the *Kritische Fragmente*, Schlegel cautions against the enthusiasm that simply wants to ‘blurt out everything’ and recommends aesthetic distance: ‘in order to write well about something, one shouldn't be interested in it any longer’ (KF 37). Schlegel uses the more direct terms ‘deception’ and ‘dissimulation’ (KF 108) to describe the shape that Romantic works ought to take. For Kierkegaard as for Schlegel, irony is a licensed form of ‘deception’

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<sup>21</sup> See the posthumously published *Point of View for my Work as an Author*, in which Kierkegaard claims: ‘that I am and was a religious author, that the whole of my work as an author is related to Christianity, to the problem “of becoming a Christian”, with a direct or indirect polemic against the monstrous illusion that we call Christendom, or against the illusion that in such a land as ours we are Christians of a sort’ (Kierkegaard, 1998, pp. 5-6).

<sup>22</sup> ‘The man who says what is true can act as foolishly as the one who says what is untrue: we are talking about the way you say it not what you say. My humour is to consider the form as much as the substance, and the barrister as much as his case, as Alcibiades told us’ (Montaigne, 1992, p. 370, III: 8).

because, as Schlegel explains, ‘it is meant to deceive no one except those who consider it a deception and who either take pleasure in the delightful roguery of making fools of the whole world or else become angry when they get an inkling they themselves might be included’ (KF 108). The deception involved in irony – the breaking of the narrative illusion in a fictional work or the humorous or disorienting introduction of incongruous perspectives in a discursive work – is thus a way of challenging the accepted terms of a discourse, since the opening up of a new perspective casts into doubt or relativises the existing frame. For both Kierkegaard and the Romantics, Socrates – ‘playful and serious, guilelessly open and deeply hidden’ (Schlegel, 1971, p. 155) – was the model for how irony could enrich the practice of philosophy, constantly shifting the terrain to take away the possibility of certainty or complacency.

In Kierkegaard’s works, the author – whether a pseudonym or Kierkegaard as a fictionalised writing subject in his ‘direct’ works – is present both in the use of the first person and in various narrative techniques of what Schlegel calls *permanent irony* or *parabasis*: intrusions of the author or ‘interruption[s] of a discourse by a shift in rhetorical register (de Man, 1996, p. 169, 178)’ that break up a unified reading of the texts and alienate text from reader. The philosophical import of such ironic gestures is that they demonstrate the freedom of self-reflection to always go beyond itself while at the same time exposing the necessarily limited nature of any given frame of reference. The ironist ‘remains faithful to the ethical’ in that the ultimate goal of irony is to make the reader aware of her own freedom. For Kierkegaard, this is the ‘highest relationship one human could have to another’ (1985, pp. 10-11). When Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authors lack the appearance of earnestness (the author ‘first and foremost does not seem to be an earnest man’ (1967, p. 274: 649: 24)) and present perspectives that are ultimately limited or erroneous, the reader is put at a distance from the text, in much the same way as an unreliable narrator complicates the reading of a novel. The discerning reader cannot remain passive but is forced into an active role of determining the meaning of the text in a dialectical relationship with the narrator, who cannot be relied upon as an authority. Kierkegaard declares that ‘one can never mimic an ironist, for he is a Proteus who incessantly alters the deception’ (1967, p. 274: 649: 24). This Protean quality is characteristic of the way in which he approaches his authorship: changing masks, alternating perspectives and rhetorical modes in order to force the reader into activity. Kierkegaard’s preoccupation with form suggests the ethical impossibility of bringing another person along in any direct sense and the simultaneous impossibility of giving up on the task of communicating. According to F. Schlegel, irony, in constantly opening the possibility of other perspectives, ‘contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism [...] between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication’ (KF 108).

Kierkegaard's use of multiple perspectives, a feature of all essayistic texts, functions as *parabasis* in disrupting the possibility of a unified reading. One of the most distinctive features of Kierkegaard's style is the division of his texts into numerous sections that approach a problem from either a different philosophical or a different rhetorical angle and break with what came before, sometimes in the form of an explicit retraction.<sup>23</sup> *Either/Or* (1843), perhaps the work in Kierkegaard's oeuvre that most resembles a book of classical essays, exploits this disjunctive mode of presentation to great effect. The work offers no fewer than nine autonomous texts—in the 'Either' half of the work alone. From the aesthetically-minded author known only as 'A' or 'The Young Man', there are thematic essays on boredom ('The Rotation of Crops') and the role of chance in artistic production ('First Love'), a series of fragments after the fashion of the *Frühromantik* ('Diapsalmata'), and an essay of musical criticism on Mozart's *Don Giovanni* ('The Musical Erotic'). Also included in this half of the work is a series of letters and journal entries from a second character called Johannes and his lover Cordelia ('The Seducer's Diary'). Like the Young Man, Johannes embodies the aesthetic life, but in the more calculated form of a seducer, for whom actuality – and flesh-and-blood women – are valued only as material for aesthetic contemplation. The 'Or' half of the work presents a defence of marriage and the ethical life from a Judge Wilhelm, in response to the young man of the first half of the work. The last subdivision of 'Or' is a sermon, written by an unnamed pastor friend of the Judge, which introduces a religious perspective into the work that departs from both the aesthetic and the ethical. Finally, the whole work is framed by an introduction from the editor Victor Eremita, who, having found the assembled papers in the drawer of an antique desk, offers his own interpretation of the good life, in tune with the Judge. Kierkegaard includes an additional frame narrative in the work, as 'A' accidentally discovers and then decides to publish the diary of his friend Johannes (the 'seducer'). The frame-within-frame structure is typical of the kind of highly reflexive novels that the *Frühromantiker* celebrated,<sup>24</sup> whose narratives are interrupted with digressions at every opportunity. The excessive multiplication of frames gives the reader a heightened awareness of points-of view without providing any direction for how to navigate or resolve the perspectives, thus reproducing the tension of lived experience and providing a fictional space within which to

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<sup>23</sup> Kierkegaard's works include an excessive amount of paratextual material – prefaces, introductions, 'attunements', preambles, and 'preliminary exhortations' – that identify the author's point of view ('I am a poet' 'I am a midwife' 'I am not philosopher' 'I am not a Christian') and sometimes threaten to swallow up the whole of a work. In 1844 Kierkegaard published an entire book of prefaces entitled *Prefaces: Light Reading for People in Various Estates According to Time and Opportunity*. Elaborate subtitles – 'a mimical-pathetical-dialectical compilation', a 'Christian psychological exposition for edification and awakening' – also reflect an interest in experimenting with different generic approaches.

<sup>24</sup> These are also the effects favoured by postmodern authors such as John Barthes, Jorge Luis Borges, and Thomas Pynchon.

‘essay’ different points of view. Kierkegaard’s meta-pseudonym Climacus comments on the form of *Either/Or*: ‘That there is no conclusion and no final decision is an indirect expression for truth as inwardness and in this way perhaps a polemic against truth as knowledge’ (1992, p. 252). As with all instances of irony, and particularly the species of pervasive irony or *parabasis* in Kierkegaard’s texts, the ‘inward’ work of appropriation is left to the reader. Climacus’ separation of truth from knowledge in this remark reflects the overall therapeutic shape of Kierkegaard’s project, which forms a part of the wider shift away from truth as certain knowledge in the tradition of essayistic writings.

Eremita’s frame narrative is worthy of further attention, as it provides additional insight into Kierkegaard’s authorial strategy. The frame narrative is a classic technique of epistolary, another genre in the essayistic mode; like his counterpart in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Eremita claims to have organised the papers he discovered in what he takes to be chronological order, but he otherwise leaves them unedited. Kierkegaard’s use of the frame device is twofold. Firstly, he seeks to prevent the reception of *Either/Or* as a systematic, or even recognisable, work of philosophy. The reader is encouraged to see the text as the product of a chance series of events: ‘A’ saving the original papers, Eremita choosing to buy this desk and not another, finding a secret drawer, etc.. There is no attempt to fashion the ‘dyed rags’<sup>25</sup> of textual integrity. In this, the work resembles Romantic fragments, which were also designed with a deliberately anti-systematic structure, and Montaigne’s *Essais*, which are peppered with declarations of their own *décousu* structure. Of course, as in these works, Eremita’s deflection from the artifice of the work is part of a highly sophisticated rhetorical strategy to incorporate contingency into the structure of the work.

Reflecting on the structure of essayistic texts, a rubric under which he includes Kierkegaard’s imaginative discourses, Adorno remarks that an essay is always constructed such that it could break off at any point.

It thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over. The unanimity of the logical order deceives us about the antagonistic nature of that on which it was jauntily imposed. Discontinuity is essential to the essay, its concern is always a conflict brought to a standstill. (1984, p. 164)

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<sup>25</sup> F. Schlegel, Critical Fragment 31: ‘many a work of art whose coherence is never questioned is, as the artist knows quite well himself, not a complete work but a fragment, or one or more fragments, a mass, a plan. But so powerful is the instinct for unity in mankind that the author himself will often bring something to a kind of completion which simply can’t be made a whole or a unit; often quite imaginatively and yet completely unnaturally. The worst thing about it is that whatever is draped about the solid, really existent fragments in the attempt to mug up a semblance of unity consists largely of dyed rags.’

In this view, Kierkegaard's ironic interruption of his texts through different existential perspectives or rhetorical/generic registers functions as an alternative to a logical or deductive ordering of life, in which order is imposed externally on processes which are essentially 'antagonistic' 'fissured' or conflictual.<sup>26</sup> Lukács suggests an additional way of understanding the significance of these gestures of interruption. After an essayistic text poses its essential question,

something comes from outside – from a reality which has no connection with the question nor with that which, as the possibility of an answer, brings forth a new question to meet it – and interrupts everything. This interruption is not an end, because it does not come from within, and yet it is the most profound ending because a conclusion from within would have been impossible. Such an interruption, however, can only be viewed humouristically. It has so little connection with that which it interrupts [...] But it is also a profound life-symbol – and, for that reason, still more profoundly humorous – that the essential is always interrupted by such things in such a way. (1971, p. 14)

As in Montaigne's *Essais*, the disjunctive, apparently random structure of Kierkegaard's texts is a deliberate strategy meant to highlight the role of contingency in temporal existence. Lukács suggests that the structure of lived experience, which the essay attempts to preserve in its form, is one in which an organic conclusion or a reconciliation of antagonisms is impossible. Thus the way in which the various discussions or perspectives in Kierkegaard's texts come to an end without resolution is in fact 'the most profound ending' because this disjunction offers readers the occasion to reflect on the open-ended structure of experience in its difference from the structure of a conceptual system. Kierkegaard's ironic interruptions function more specifically as a polemical contrast to the Hegelian 'system', particularly the movement of the *Aufhebung*, which Kierkegaard viewed as logically and existentially incoherent. In Hegelian logic, particular actuality is conceived of as abstract and the whole is considered concrete, which renders difference an illusion. 'What is true is rather found in motion, in a process, however, in which there is rest; difference, while it lasts, is but a temporary condition, through which comes unity, full and concrete' (Hegel, 'Lectures on the History of Philosophy', 1955, I, pp. 23-25). The system reaches its conclusions only by 'smoothing over' the difference between thought and being and 'abandoning diversity'.<sup>27</sup>

There is much in Kierkegaard's work to suggest that he shared Lukács' view of the comedy of disjunctive structures deriving from the observation of these same structures in

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<sup>26</sup> Kierkegaard's writing style is one of the key influences on Adorno's notion of negative dialectics.

<sup>27</sup> While Hegel and Kierkegaard are both thinkers of motion, Kierkegaard, influenced by the readings of the Danish Hegelians, viewed Hegel's dialectic as effectively arrested by an overarching system. Hegel, for Kierkegaard, denied any distinction between thought and being and so failed to take seriously the structure of becoming.

experience. Lukács opposes essays to works of tragedy, which function according to a logic of reconciliation that provides the meaning of the whole at the end. By contrast, the structure of the essay is occasional, with external accidents rather than an *a priori* fate or design determining its progression; the ‘occasion’ (*anledning*—that which leads to) is a major theme in *Either/Or* and appears in a number of Kierkegaard’s works. The character Johannes laments in his diary the lack of opportunity to carry out his plans to seduce the young Cordelia because she rarely leaves the house of her aunt. In one journal entry, he pleads with chance, declaring:

You whom I love with all my soul, in whose image I form myself [...] I challenge you to a fight—why do you not make your appearance? Cursed chance, I am waiting for you! Just as a temple dancer dances to the honour of the god [*Guden*], so I have consecrated myself to your service; light, thinly clad, limber unarmed, I renounce everything. I own nothing; I desire nothing; I love nothing; I have nothing to lose [...] Surprise me—I am ready. (1987, p. 327)

Johannes declares himself ‘ready’ to be surprised by fate, having lightened himself through the renunciation of all desires and possessions. In this case, the chance occasion for which he waits is a poetic one, since Johannes relies on actuality as ‘material’ for his poetic reflections. Indeed, *Either/Or* links poetic composition in general to the ‘occasion,’ defined as ‘the nothing that lets everything come forth’ (1987, p. 236), ‘the extra element for an inner decision to become an outer decision’ (1987, p. 234). Within this framework, that which allows possibility to be actualised is entirely out of the subject’s hands, since chance, by definition, simply happens and cannot be willed. ‘This is a secret implicit in actuality—an offense to the Jews and a foolishness to the Greeks. The occasion is always the accidental, and the prodigious paradox is that the accidental is absolutely just as necessary as the necessary’ (1987, p. 234). The notion of the accidental as necessary is a formulation of the contingency of experience, as expressed by Lukács and Adorno, the comic element of existence that is reduplicated in the essay’s discontinuous structure.<sup>28</sup> Johannes describes it as God’s joke on mankind to have ‘something so insignificant and inferior, something people are almost ashamed to talk about in polite society, be absolutely part of it all’ (1987, p. 328). Thus Kierkegaard seems to suggest that Johannes’ preparation and readiness to be surprised, though in some sense paradoxical and comic, can also be read as a healthy openness toward contingency.

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<sup>28</sup> The language of Johannes’ description of the occasion also makes it clear that Kierkegaard is targeting Hegel’s handling of possibility in the *Logic*, which Kierkegaard rejects in favour of an Aristotelian view.



Johannes' discussion of the occasion may also contain a clue, albeit in parodic or negative form,<sup>29</sup> about the role of grace in Christian faith and about the nature of Kierkegaardian communication. Across his signed and pseudonymous works, Kierkegaard insists that he cannot directly bring another to the truth or to faith, that this exceeds the bounds of what one person can do for another. But he nevertheless frequently refers to his work as an 'occasion'. If one were to apply Johannes' notion of the occasion to this disclaimer in other texts, it would seem that Kierkegaard in fact gives his texts quasi-divine status as the arbitrary yet necessary element that catalyses the subject as possibility into decisive action. However, this reading relies on Johannes getting the concept of the occasion right, and it is more plausible that, like Kierkegaard's other pseudonyms, Johannes the Seducer grasps *some*, but not all of the truth of his subject. This partial failure is suggested by the fact that the aesthete *suffers* from his dependence on chance, forced to receive from the outside what is essential to his being.<sup>30</sup> In the Christian framework by contrast, the 'extra element' of grace required for self-realisation is not wholly external to oneself, since it issues from the absolute in which the self is grounded, enabling one to become what one truly is (1983, p. 16). This is why, in *Fragments*, Kierkegaard replaces the aesthetic notion of 'occasion' with the Christian category of the 'moment'—in which the eternal enters time. What Kierkegaard's notion of communication seems to share with Johannes' understanding of the occasion is a sense that a subject's receptivity or openness to that which is beyond her ability to control or conceptualise functions as a necessary preliminary step to existential 'actualisation'. Though in the Christian framework only divine grace can help the subject to realise herself through faith, Kierkegaard's negative gestures help the reader to become 'light, thinly clad, limber' enough to make the leap. The underlying dialectic seems to involve

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<sup>29</sup> There is ample evidence within the text to suggest that Johannes' openness to chance is intended to be parodic of the receptivity to divine grace in Christianity. Johannes' plea is specifically a parody of Job's conversation with God, a moment that receives parodic treatment in another of Kierkegaard's 1843 writings: *Repetition*. Parody in Kierkegaard's work tends to be used to express a partial truth from within the limited perspective of a particular life view. We are given clues in *E/O* that Johannes' aesthetically orientated remarks are meant to open up a comparison with the parallel Christian notion of grace. Johannes, tellingly, links the occasion to the teacher/learner relationship (p. 258) in addition to associating it with composition. This constellation of concepts will be familiar to readers of *Fragments* and the *Postscript*, as well as Kierkegaard's journal entries on the subject of communication. In *Fragments*, Kierkegaard makes a crucial distinction between the Socratic and the Christian. In a purely immanent Socratic picture, one human being can serve as an occasion (and no more) for another to come to the truth, since all subjects possess the capacity to 'unforget' the truth. In the Christian picture, the subject exists fundamentally in *untruth*, so an 'extra element' is required before one is in a position to recognise the truth or make the 'leap' of faith. The Christian category for the external power that makes the faith possible is grace. Johannes makes a direct analogy between the occasion and grace in his declaration that anyone who denies the importance of the occasion in poetic creation is a 'Pelagian autocrat'—a reference to the heretic Pelagius who emphasised free will to the extent of denying the role of grace in Christian salvation.

<sup>30</sup> This is why Kierkegaard identifies boredom as the ultimate existential risk or temptation of the aesthetic life.

giving up in order to be given to, a ‘double movement’ that is also present in the Abraham story in *Fear and Trembling*.

Returning to Victor Eremita’s frame narrative of *Either/Or*, one sees yet another example of the negative strategy of flawed perspectives, as Eremita’s preface provides an additional – reflective – point of view on the essays that make up the work. Before the reader is able to begin, Eremita performs an initial ‘reading’ of the bundle of texts and, specifically, of the relationship between the aesthetically-orientated ‘Either’ reflections with the ethical advice of Judge Wilhelm that makes up the ‘Or’ part of the work. He offers what those familiar with Kierkegaard’s other works, or those alive to the irony in the text, will recognise as a ‘bad’ reading, wholeheartedly endorsing the Judge’s ethical perspective and recommending that subsequent readers follow his advice and get married. The irony in the text entails leaving open a possibility for the naive reader to think that the work of interpretation has already been carried out by the editor.<sup>31</sup> For the reflective reader, this device opens up a gap of understanding that can be overcome only by the reader’s active involvement in the construction of textual meaning. Eremita’s reading, dialectically qualified by the numerous other points of view presented in the work, functions as a *via negativa* that leads readers to a higher perspective not specified within the bounds of the text itself. This strategy is in fact characteristic of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works, all of which involve degrees of ‘getting it wrong’ as part of what Kierkegaard deems a ‘continual striving’ toward the truth.<sup>32</sup>

### **A *via negativa* to faith**

Kierkegaard’s negative gestures and intentional misreadings are part of a wider textual strategy in the pseudonymous works, described in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* as the art of ‘taking away’. Addressing himself to the upright bourgeois society of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Denmark, Kierkegaard points to the bounties of knowledge – scientific, medical, philosophical, historical,

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<sup>31</sup> ‘It is a very good sign when the harmonious bores are at a loss about how they should react to this continuous self-parody, when they fluctuate endlessly between belief and disbelief until they get dizzy and take what is meant as a joke seriously and what is meant seriously as a joke’ (Schlegel, CF 108).

<sup>32</sup> *Fear and Trembling* (1843) follows a similar negative strategy, presenting the limited perspective of de Silentio who admits to being unable to understand Abraham. Though the text fails in its stated aim of making faith comprehensible to thought, it does so in a way that brings the reader closer to faith, even if getting closer takes the form of acknowledging that one does not understand or does not feel capable of the leap. Likewise in *Repetition* (1843), Constantine Constantius tries and fails to achieve ‘repetition’ in attempting to recreate *à la lettre* a trip to Berlin he took years earlier. Though neither of the two main characters in the narrative fully grasps what is at stake in repetition, which is ultimately a Christian and not an aesthetic category, their attempts put the movement into relief by showing what it is not: irony, recollection, mediation, hope, Heraclitian flux, Eleatic stasis.

technological – achieved in his lifetime but confronts the nagging sense that it hasn't been appropriated, that knowledge has piled up in a rapid and fragmented fashion.

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 [...]? [...] When a communicator 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 [...] taking away is precisely communication. (1992, p. 275)

This remarkable passage elaborates a therapeutic textual strategy of writing as a kind of subtraction, set within the context of excessive knowledge or knowledge drained of significance. The critical tradition of the essay to which I argue Kierkegaard belongs is uniquely positioned to reflect this shift in focus from the content of knowledge to one's relationship to knowledge – with the characteristic first-person perspective and the variety of ironic strategies employed to call any discursive frame into question. Looking back to Socrates<sup>33</sup> and anticipating 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernist and surrealist strategies of *Verfremdung*, Climacus describes his procedure as 'making strange' the knowledge to which one has become indifferent, presenting knowledge in a form that is unfamiliar and so forcing the subject to repeat or appropriate that knowledge, (as if) for the first time. The aim of digestion, appropriation, repetition then takes the place of the aim of discovery, penetration, and acquisition. Reckoning with one's actual position or condition, rather than 'going further' serves as a precondition for any genuine conversion or opening within existence.

The description of communication as 'taking away' occurs within a work that takes as its central concern the question of how a finite subject can enter into a relationship with infinite Being, or how the finite can gain eternal significance. Cautioning against a world-denying transcendence, Kierkegaard faces the historical and temporal as a necessary part of the Christian dialectic, evidenced by the event of God entering time. Kierkegaard makes it his task to address his own historical moment—in comic, sometimes bitter polemics—as a way of helping readers to begin where they are, to 'digest' or to acknowledge their position. Thus Climacus declares in the opening of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that in contrast to the systematisers: 'I remain where I am' (1992, p. 16). This kind of contingent starting point, rather than a speculative

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<sup>33</sup> That Kierkegaard took the ironic Socrates as a model of communication is evident across the whole of his authorship, with *Fragments* proclaiming that midwifery 'remains highest relationship between human beings' (1985, pp. 10-11).

beginning from first principles, is typical of the essayistic, which seeks to relate itself to existence and so can only ever begin *in medias res*. In a complacently Christian society, the task facing Kierkegaard was to help his readers to remember what it was to be a Christian, as ‘the only unforgiveable high treason against Christianity is the single individual’s taking his relation to it for granted’ (*Ibid*). In such an environment, delivering the knowledge of Christianity in the unfamiliar form of an imaginative discourse on the relationship between Socrates and Christ (*Fragments*), a dialectic between the tragic hero and the knight of faith (*Fear and Trembling*) or a psychological study (*The Sickness unto Death*, *The Concept of Anxiety*) was a way to make readers acknowledge their own starting point and thus to open up the question of their relationship to the infinite, which familiarity and convention had closed off.

*Fear and Trembling* is exemplary of this strategy of reorienting the vision of readers so that they might see themselves anew as possibility, stripped of the usual pretensions and assurances. The work’s author, Johannes de Silentio, turns to the subject of Abraham as the father of faith, trying and failing to make the movement of faith comprehensible to thought. His initial Socratic admission that he is incapable of understanding Abraham offers readers an opportunity to likewise suspend – or at least re-evaluate – what they believe they know about one of the central figures in Judeo-Christian history. Rather than beginning from the position of the pastor’s sermon, in which doubt is condemned as failing to accept what ‘only the most ignorant would dare to deny’ (1992, p. 12), De Silentio’s rhetorical position actively encourages doubt, inviting readers to join the author in admitting to themselves their inability to understand the matter of faith. To reinforce this aim of suspension or questioning, de Silentio offers a number of conflicting perspectives in the text. The ‘Attunement’ section that opens the book presents imaginative versions of the biblical Abraham and Isaac story, each emphasising a different aspect of the narrative and a different way of understanding Abraham’s actions. In one moving version, Isaac sees the knife tremble in Abraham’s hand and is unable to ever have faith again, understanding that God has commanded his murder. In another, Abraham goes through the motions of faith, offering up Isaac, but in his soul he ‘becomes old’ and loses his taste for life as a result of the strain of God’s trial. This strategy of different perspectives carries through the whole of the work, which unfolds as a series of essays to get closer to the reality of faith, each attempt ultimately failing.

In this way, as Climacus describes in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the reader is brought ‘as close as possible’ to the question of how to live.

Instead of presenting the good in the form of actuality, as is ordinarily done, that this person and that person have actually lived and have actually done this, and thus

transforming the reader into an observer, an admirer, an appraiser, it should be presented in the form of *possibility*. Then whether or not the reader wants to exist in it is placed as close as possible to him. (1992, pp. 358-359, my emphasis)

We have seen a number of strategies by which Kierkegaard develops the inherent openness of essayistic writing, particularly with respect to the subject viewed as possibility rather than as a fixed identity or as part of a conceptual system. Possibility is for Kierkegaard the logical category of temporal existence or becoming, and part of his task as a writer is to actively engage his audience's sense of the anxiety or uncanniness of existence, since one is never fully present, fully at home; as long as one stands *in medias res*, rather than at the end, the significance of a life is always being worked out. Doubt – in *Fear and Trembling* – is the recognition of this uncanny feature of the human, a premonition that human existence is not merely finite but contains the possibility of the infinite or unconditioned.

### **The sublime in the everyday**

Finally, Kierkegaard's essayism offers the possibility of the existential –though not conceptual – reconciliation of finite and the infinite. The pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling* considers the leap into faith impossibly difficult, as it involves staking one's life on that which is beyond conceptualisation, or, as Climacus later describes it in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, on an 'objective absurdity'. Yet, from the outside, the extraordinary knight of faith looks entirely pedestrian—so much so that De Silentio asks in amazement, 'can that really be him? He looks just like a tax collector!' The image of the faithful one chatting with shopkeepers and looking forward with relish to the humble domestic scene of dinner at home with his wife is certainly at odds with the arduous and angst-ridden psychological effort that Kierkegaard, in his polemical attempt to 'raise the price' of faith, attributes to the process of becoming a subject. But the contradiction in Kierkegaard's account of faith is a reminder that the leap of faith he envisions is not a leap into another world or a choice by which the subject, like the systematic philosopher, denies the conditions of temporal existence. On the contrary, the portrait of the knight of faith in *Fear and Trembling* suggests that faith, unlike doubt or 'infinite resignation', is a movement that allows one to live fully in the everyday, to evidence 'the sublime in the pedestrian' (1994, p. 52). Thus Abraham comes to resemble something like the ideal philosopher of the ancient sceptics, who, having questioned everything, is able to achieve tranquillity in common life. But where the ancient sceptic actively works to maintain his withholding of assent, Abraham maintains his passionate interest in or desire for the finite—embodied in the person of

Isaac.<sup>34</sup> Like the sceptics though, whom De Silentio praises for maintaining doubt as a lifelong task, Abraham's apparently effortless pedestrianism requires the everyday work of rejecting the inveiglements of cognition, an on-going dance of the temporal and eternal.

Crucially, the leap exemplified by Abraham does not come as a result of effort alone, though it indeed takes effort to become 'light' enough for the leap—that is, to renounce one's own understanding. Kierkegaard helps in this task through his negative writing strategies of 'taking away'. There are no guarantees in this approach that the reader will be led to faith, rather than to sceptical withholding of judgement or even to despair. The negative project can, at best, lead to a positive orientation of receptivity or radical openness. In purely immanent sense, this means accepting that I am always other than myself in time or becoming. In a spiritual sense it concerns relating myself to something radically other, something unthinkable and yet something that grounds my being. The tension of myself as the object of speculation and myself as I am, as a possible opening to the infinite, is one that Kierkegaard seeks to keep alive even for the believer, such that faith is not a transition into rest, which would for Kierkegaard be the equivalent of spiritual suicide. He introduces the category of repetition (*gentagelsen*), desiring what one already has, in order to maintain the continued striving of existence against the temptation to become what Sartre would later call the *en-soi*, and what Kierkegaard refers to as death or fantasy existence. 'Even if a person has achieved the highest, the repetition by which he must indeed fill out his existence, if he is not to go backward (or become a fantastical being), will again be a continued striving, because here in turn the conclusiveness is moved ahead and postponed' (1992, p. 121). The only temporal dialectic available in which the subject does not either rush ahead to see herself as *already* actualised and reified (1992, p. 146) or does not try sneak backwards out of existence, as the Greeks recollected their way to union with the Ideal, is repetition—desiring to become what one is (2009, p. 3), which involves an opening to infinite possibility within time, within the humble scenes of daily life.

This dialectic is reinforced and encouraged in Kierkegaard's writings. The movement of 'going further' that de Silentio criticises in *Fear and Trembling* is replaced with the spatial metaphor of beginning where one is, which, like becoming oneself, another key metaphor, is not a given but is something to be achieved. The task of working out where one's *interest* lies can be understood as part of the larger aim in essayistic writing to 'leave everything as it is'. In both there is an emphasis on the transformative power of seeing or acknowledging things as they are,

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<sup>34</sup> As Kierkegaard notes in *Fragments*, 'belief and doubt are opposite passions' (1994, Interlude). The sceptic achieves tranquility through the decisive act – constantly renewed – to withhold judgement about what presents itself to his senses. The Christian chooses, with 'infinite interest' to believe that for which there is not only insufficient evidence but which evidence positively argues against, that which is objectively impossible.

with the understanding that this necessitates continual striving. The shape of these movements, and of essayistic writing more generally, is circular: what one is or knows is revisited or returned to in a gesture of repetition that entails both newness and what was already there as possibility. The next chapter will explore Stanley Cavell's development of the theme of repetition into a notion of the everyday as a task or an achievement – a prize reclaimed from scepticism – reinforced through the philosophical form of the essay.