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## Revelations of Self in the Pseudonymous Authorship

Between 1843 and 1846 an extraordinary series of pseudonymous works from the pen of Søren Kierkegaard appeared in the bookshops of Copenhagen. The series began in February 1843 with the massive two-volume set *Either/Or*, edited and annotated by Victor Eremita. This was followed eight months later by the simultaneous appearance of two shorter works: *Fear and Trembling*, by Johannes de Silentio, and *Repetition*, by Constantin Constantius. In June 1844 came three more slender volumes: *Philosophical Fragments*, by Johannes Climacus, *The Concept of Anxiety*, by Vigilius Haufniensis, and *Prefaces*, by Nicolaus Notabene. The series was rounded off with the publication of two substantial works: *Stages on Life's Way*, which appeared in the spring of 1845 under the editorship of Hilarius Bookbinder, and Johannes Climacus's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, which appeared in February of the following year.

As if to accentuate the pseudonymous nature of these books, Kierkegaard published under his own name a concurrent series of devotional writings intended for "edification."<sup>1</sup> Collectively, these pseudonymous books and edifying discourses comprise what Kierkegaard would later refer to as his "authorship," though in truth they account for only part of the total literary production, which continued until shortly before his death in 1855.

Kierkegaard's professed intention in employing pseudonyms was twofold: first, to present the reader with a choice between a number of competing world views or existential possibilities; and second, to withdraw himself from the process of interpretation by presenting these views in such a way that the reader would be free to make a personal decision.

However, the very same strategy by which Kierkegaard sought to educate and liberate his readers, today poses a formidable challenge to the exegete, whose purpose it is to interpret Kierkegaard's meaning. For on what basis is it possible to determine when the views expressed by the various pseudonyms reflect the mind of Kierkegaard? Commentators have approached this question in different ways. In this chapter I shall examine a variety of what may be characterized as "modern" and "postmodern" responses to the problem of reading Kierkegaard.

### THE PROBLEM OF KIERKEGAARD'S PSEUDONYMITY

Traditionally, literary critics have tried to get a handle on the meaning of a text by tying it into the author's creative intention. But Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship, with its elaborate system of Chinese boxes, proves to be an especially frustrating subject for intentionalists. In *Either/Or*, the papers of several fictional authors are brought to light by a fictional editor; in *Repetition*, the young man with whom Constantin corresponds turns out to be no more than a psychological experiment, a product of Constantin's imagination; and in the *Postscript*, Climacus reviews the work of other pseudonyms, thus creating an internal structure of reading and criticism. Perhaps the most striking example of this strategy of mystification is the provocative article entitled "Who is the Author of *Either/Or*?", ostensibly written by a pseudonym whose own papers appear in the first volume of that work.<sup>2</sup>

In "A First and Last Declaration," which we find appended to the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard explains that his relationship to the pseudonyms is more tenuous than that of an author who merely creates fictional characters. "I am," he writes, "impersonal, or am personal in the third person, a *souffleur* who has poetically produced authors, whose prefaces in turn are their own production, as are even their own names."<sup>3</sup> As Bertel Pederson points out, Kierkegaard does not see himself as the powerful director behind the scenes, but as one who at most assists or prompts the "authors" to perform. At every turn, the pseudonyms undermine Kierkegaard's authority over the texts.<sup>4</sup>

Commentators have attempted to circumvent this problem in two characteristic ways. On the one hand, the unusual richness and intensity of Kierkegaard's life has drawn the attention of scholars in search of an interpretive key to his writings. This tendency has been fostered in part by a long and respected tradition in Kierkegaard studies which is straightfor-

wardly biographical in orientation.<sup>5</sup> The primary object of this type of inquiry is not the text itself, but Kierkegaard's personal life and the historical context in which he lived and wrote. The biographer probes into Kierkegaard's letters, papers, and diaries, in an attempt to penetrate his innermost thoughts and feelings, to reveal the man behind the masks.

Kierkegaard, who consciously wrote from his personal experiences, was well aware that many of his readers would try to identify him with the pseudonyms, and he actively sought to preempt such readings. In "A First and Last Declaration," he explicitly warns us against attributing to him any of the statements found in the pseudonymous works. He claims that he is no closer to any one pseudonym, but equally far from them all; that it is foolish to bring his biography into the discussion as if that could shed light on anything, least of all the true significance of the authorship. In this, Kierkegaard seems to have anticipated a view that would become commonplace in twentieth-century literary criticism.

Other commentators, myself included, have attempted to focus specifically on the philosophical content of Kierkegaard's writings. As C. Stephen Evans explains, "If we are interested in the truth of the views presented . . . then it really does not matter very much whether Kierkegaard personally held these views. For from the fact that he held a view, nothing follows as to the truth, profundity, or value of the view."<sup>6</sup> Although historians and biographers will have a valid interest in the question of how Kierkegaard stands in relation to his pseudonyms, this is not properly a philosophical concern.

The philosophical approach to interpreting Kierkegaard tries to avoid the problem created by the pseudonyms by shifting the focus of inquiry to a purportedly neutral ground. However, if we find in Climacus an argument to the effect that faith is not a species of knowledge, we may still wish to ask how Kierkegaard stands in relation to that particular argument, or what he is trying to accomplish with it, if anything. Even if the truth, profundity, and value of the argument is independent of Kierkegaard, we may still wish to know how it is to be interpreted within the larger context of his literary production. This type of inquiry forces us to go beyond the point of view of any single pseudonymous author. To claim that we should be concerned only with the pseudonyms or their arguments is merely to defer the problem of reading, which resurfaces as soon as we consider the authorship as a totality.<sup>7</sup>

Kierkegaard addresses this problem of reading in two autobiographical works, *My Activity as a Writer* (1851) and *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* (written in 1848, published posthumously in 1859). In the lat-

ter, Kierkegaard explains that he was essentially a religious author, and that his writings were designed to throw light on the problem of becoming a Christian.<sup>8</sup> He admits that he was not absolutely clear about this task from the very beginning, but that the failure of the aesthetic life to provide a satisfactory answer to his deepest existential concerns forced him to the realization that an answer could be found only in religious categories. Furthermore, he suggests that the hand of Providence was guiding his progress in this direction, enabling him to produce a literature that served to illuminate the true nature of the religious life.<sup>9</sup>

But Kierkegaard's explanation seems to invite as many questions as it answers. One wonders, for instance, why a religious writer would employ aesthetic means to achieve a religious end. This question is directly addressed by Kierkegaard in Part One of *The Point of View*.<sup>10</sup> There it is explained that the religious purpose of the authorship was to dispel the "monstrous illusion" of Christendom: the fact that his contemporaries had come to regard themselves as Christian as a matter of course, despite the fact that they lived their lives in aesthetic categories. Believing that a direct attack would only cause people to cling all the more tightly to this illusion, Kierkegaard reasoned that indirect tactics were required: "If it is an illusion that all are Christians—and if there is anything to be done about it, it must be done indirectly, not by one who vociferously proclaims himself an extraordinary Christian, but by one who, better instructed, is ready to declare that he is not a Christian at all."<sup>11</sup> Kierkegaard thus sought to win the sympathy of his audience by provisionally adopting an aesthetic point of view.<sup>12</sup> Having thereby opened a line of communication, he could proceed to illustrate the poverty of the aesthetic life, and so place his readers in a position to realize for themselves that they were not living in accordance with the requirements of true Christianity.

Kierkegaard acknowledges that the indirect strategy employed in the pseudonymous works is a form of deception. However, he urges us not to be alarmed by the word 'deception.' For, as he points out, it is not only legitimate to deceive a person for the sake of the truth, but also to deceive a person *into* the truth.<sup>13</sup> The deception, of course, lies in the fact that Kierkegaard does not begin *directly* with the religious, but engages in diversionary tactics in order to get to the religious point of view. He contends, however, that precisely this form of deception was required to dispel the illusion of Christendom.<sup>14</sup>

Commentators have generally accepted this post-pseudonymous explanation at face value, pointing out that it establishes a normative framework for interpreting the authorship. According to Paul L. Holmer,

a work like *The Point of View* provides the reader with a “logical” standpoint from which to judge the meaning and validity of the entire aesthetic production.<sup>15</sup> C. Stephen Evans seems to concur, observing that it is in fact not hard to show that “a good many of the opinions expressed by the pseudonyms were held by Kierkegaard himself. The method whereby this can be done is simply to compare the pseudonymous works with the works that Kierkegaard wrote under his own name and with his opinions as expressed in his *Journals and Papers*.”<sup>16</sup> In this way the writings that appear under Kierkegaard’s own name are seen as establishing a natural ordering of the texts.

But if we take seriously the alterity of the pseudonymous texts—the position that Kierkegaard could only discuss these texts from an external standpoint (the position he claimed for himself in 1846)—then how are we to understand a book that claims to offer us *the* point of view for the authorship? It would seem that such a book oversteps the limitations already imposed on what can be said. At the very least it invites our suspicion concerning the author’s true motivation for writing it. This situation has prompted some commentators to insist that the distinction between truth and fiction in the authorship cannot be decided merely by reference to Kierkegaard, whose own writing serves only to complicate the relation between the writing self and the written word.

In a penetrating study of the primary documents, Henning Fenger challenges Kierkegaard’s claim that a religious element was present in the authorship from the very beginning.<sup>17</sup> Fenger offers evidence of a systematic attempt on Kierkegaard’s part to suppress, misrepresent, and deliberately falsify documents pertinent to the interpretation of his life and works. The central thesis of his book is that “Kierkegaard-research went down the wrong track at the outset and that ‘the mistake,’ to a certain extent—to a great extent—goes back to Kierkegaard himself” (xiii).

The implicit assumption guiding Fenger’s study is that, although we cannot trust Kierkegaard’s own claims concerning his purpose in the authorship, we can approach the truth of the matter by checking these claims against external sources. Judging from the sources, it appears that the real motivation behind Kierkegaard’s aesthetic production was not religious at all, but the fact that he failed to win acceptance by the elite literary circle of his day. Fenger contends that Kierkegaard’s authorship grew out of his profound resentment against this intellectual coterie, and more specifically against its *arbiter elegantiarum*, Johan Ludwig Heiberg, for failing to acknowledge his literary genius. The subsequent attack on Hegel and romanticism is thus seen as a direct result of the conflict with Heiberg

and not, as Kierkegaard would later have us believe, an abiding religious concern to clarify the requirements of Christian faith.

Fenger argues convincingly that many of the private writings, including the famous Gilleleje notation from the spring of 1838 (which scholars have taken as a record of Kierkegaard's religious conversion), are not autobiographical in nature, but rather the remnants of an abandoned literary project (81-135). This type of error could simply be attributed to the careless treatment of primary documents. However, the "myths" Kierkegaard created about himself, his authorship, and his relationships to key people in his life, are much more difficult to trace. Fenger presents evidence of Kierkegaard's early romantic attachment to a young woman by the name of Bolette Rørdam; a relationship that predated his engagement to Regine Olsen, and which he later attempted to conceal from posterity (150-157). Moreover, in sharp contrast with Kierkegaard's own account of the momentous break with Regine, Fenger maintains that the real crisis was precipitated when Kierkegaard learned of Regine's subsequent engagement to another man. From this standpoint, Fenger writes, "it is altogether understandable that he now leaps into faith and glorifies his 'sacrifice': his renunciation of Regine becomes a religious act in the service of higher powers" (219).

According to Fenger, Kierkegaard had established himself as an aesthete with the publication of *Either/Or* in 1843, and from that time on he could not legitimately ask to be taken seriously as a religious writer (2). The story of his early conversion to Christianity and of the great personal sacrifice he endured to become a writer in the service of his faith are merely examples of the way Kierkegaard poetically transformed his life into literature.

Commenting on Nietzsche's aestheticism, Alexander Nehamas writes:

Nietzsche . . . looks at the world in general as if it were a sort of artwork; in particular, he looks at it as if it were a literary text. And he arrives at many of his views of the world and the things within it, including his views of human beings, by generalizing to them ideas and principles that apply intuitively to the literary situation, to the creation and interpretation of literary texts and characters.<sup>18</sup>

These words could with equal justification have been written about Kierkegaard, whose pseudonyms dramatize the relation between the aes-

thetic, ethical, and religious forms of life. But whereas Nehamas discerns in Nietzsche's aestheticism a strategy for developing the thesis of perspectivism, Fenger contends that Kierkegaard had no clear sense of the boundary between fiction and truth, illusion and reality.<sup>19</sup> His life must be regarded as "a gigantic play in which [he] acted a profusion of roles, among them that of Søren Kierkegaard in countless versions."<sup>20</sup> If there is a clear moral to be drawn from all this, it is the following: that where literal truth is concerned, we are no better off looking to Kierkegaard's later writings than to the earlier pseudonymous ones.

There are, however, a number of problems with Fenger's argument. First of all, he does not fully acknowledge Kierkegaard's own repeated assertion that the religious reason behind his use of the pseudonyms was neither dominant nor decisive when the aesthetic project was begun. In *My Activity as a Writer*, Kierkegaard confides: "So it is that I understand everything *now*. From the beginning I could not thus survey what has been in fact my own development."<sup>21</sup> Fenger's failure to grasp this point gives rise to a curious tension in his argument. For, on the one hand, he wants to claim that Kierkegaard was merely a "poetic" Christian; yet he does not want to rule out the possibility that Kierkegaard at some point sincerely committed himself to Christian faith. But in this case, as George Stack points out, it is really only a question of timing, not one of truth.<sup>22</sup>

Fenger's argument is further weakened by the fact that it does not adequately account for the eighteen "edifying discourses" Kierkegaard published between 1843 and 1844. These devotional works, which form a common thread running throughout the literary production, pose a serious challenge to the claim that there was no clear religious element present in the authorship from the start. The first two discourses, "The Expectancy of Faith" and "Every Good and Every Perfect Gift is From Above," appear shortly after the publication of *Either/Or*. Fenger acknowledges this fact, hastening to add that the majority of Kierkegaard's early writings, including those published prior to *Either/Or*,<sup>23</sup> belong to the category of the aesthetic. But he does not explain how the discourses fit the aesthetic pattern of these early writings, nor does he suggest what purpose they might otherwise have served. Fenger does note, in passing, that Kierkegaard waited until May 1843 to publish the aforementioned discourses, and he wonders whether it would not have been more consistent with the religious aim of the authorship to have published them simultaneously with *Either/Or*.<sup>24</sup> However, in view of the fact that these works are separated by less than three months, Fenger's objection does not appear to be a very serious one.

Furthermore, it may be noted that *Either/Or* was quickly followed into print by a series of articles, all designed to draw attention to the peculiar form and content of the larger work. I have already mentioned one of these in passing.<sup>25</sup> The others include an ironic piece by Victor Eremita entitled "A Word of Thanks to Professor Heiberg," in which the author replies to Heiberg's hastily prepared review of his book; and an article by Kierkegaard entitled "A Little Explanation," in which he disputes the "persistent rumor" that the sermon which concludes *Either/Or* is in fact the same sermon he once preached as a student in the pastoral seminary. The latter article was published on May 16, the same day as *Two Edifying Discourses*. Thus, *Either/Or* was very much a fresh topic of discussion when the first discourses quietly appeared on the scene; and this fact is in every way compatible with the indirect strategy Kierkegaard describes in *The Point of View*.

A third and far more serious problem, however, concerns the scope of Fenger's work. As a source critic, Fenger is perfectly within his rights to attempt to construct a picture of Kierkegaard in the social and historical context of Golden Age Denmark. Yet it seems that he wants to do more than this. For the thesis of his book is not merely that we have misunderstood the early influences on Kierkegaard's life, but that as a direct result we have misinterpreted the authorship. In this way, the distinction between the man and the text is subtly dissolved; Kierkegaard's life becomes the basis for interpreting his work.

However, it is a more or less received opinion among literary theorists that, regardless of what we may know about an author's life, it is a mistake to suppose that textual meaning is grounded in authorial intent. This view questions the suspicion that there must always be a deeper fact about what a text really means; that deep in the mind of the author at the moment of creation there lies a clue that definitely settles the issue of correct interpretation. It is precisely this suspicion that Wimsatt and Beardsley have called the "intentional fallacy."

Following this line of criticism, I would argue that Kierkegaard's intention is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the meaning or the value of his authorship. This is not to say that there is no room for biography in textual interpretation, but rather that biographical considerations, being external to the text, must always be regulated by the philological constraints presented by the text itself. The closest we can ever get to Kierkegaard's intending mind, outside his texts, will still be short of his effective intention as this appears in the texts and can be read from them. True, we must admit the possibility that Kierkegaard's retro-



spective interpretation of the authorship plays fast and loose with the facts. What is really interesting, however, is not that he asks us to read the authorship that way, but that it *can* be read that way. Kierkegaard's truthfulness is only an issue if we assume that textual meaning is identical with authorial meaning, or that a text must mean what an author says it means.

More interesting still is the fact that this view of textual meaning is largely anticipated in the pseudonymous writings. The article "Who is the Author of *Either/Or*?" pokes fun at the view that knowledge of an author's identity is indispensable to a proper appreciation of his work. The piece concludes with the following observation: "Most people, including the author of this article, think it is not worth the trouble to be concerned about who the author is. They are happy not to know his identity, for then they have only the book to deal with, without being bothered or distracted by his personality."<sup>26</sup> And several years later, in a section of the *Postscript* entitled "A Glance at a Contemporary Effort in Danish Literature," Climacus comments:

Whether my interpretation is the same as that of the authors, I can of course not know with certainty, since I am only a reader; on the other hand, it gives me pleasure to see that the pseudonyms . . . have themselves said nothing, nor misused a preface to assume an official attitude toward the production, as if an author were in a purely legal sense the best interpreter of his own words; or as if it could help a reader that an author had intended this or that, if it was not realized; or as if it were certain that it was realized because the author himself says so in the preface.<sup>27</sup>

Here, Kierkegaard's most developed pseudonym directly challenges the assumption that knowledge of the author's creative intention is indispensable to the activity of textual interpretation. And in the very same breath he suggests what he takes to be the correct critical stance for an author to take toward his own work, namely, that of a reader.

But what scholars have tended to overlook is the fact that when Kierkegaard comments on his relationship to the pseudonymous production he maintains the very same position. In "A First and Last Declaration," for example, Kierkegaard explicitly disavows interpretive authority over the pseudonymous texts by reducing his status to that of a reader. As he writes: "I have no opinion regarding [the pseudonymous books] except as a third person, no knowledge of their meaning except as a

reader, not the remotest private relationship to them, since this is impossible in a doubly-reflected communication."<sup>28</sup> This position is later reaffirmed in the autobiographical works. In *My Activity as a Writer*, we read: "That I was 'without authority' I have from the first moment asserted clearly and repeated as a stereotyped phrase. I regarded myself preferably as a *reader* of the books, not as the *author*."<sup>29</sup> And again, in Part One of *The Point of View*, where Kierkegaard explains that he was essentially a religious author, he writes:

It might seem that a mere protestation to this effect on the part of the author himself would be more than enough; for surely he knows best what is meant. For my part, however, I have little confidence in protestations with respect to literary productions and am inclined to take an objective view of my own works. If as a third person, in the role of a reader, I cannot substantiate the fact that what I affirm is so, it would not occur to me to wish to win a cause which I regard as lost. If I were to begin *qua* author to protest, I might easily bring to confusion the whole work, which from first to last is dialectical.<sup>30</sup>

Kierkegaard acknowledges that, as a historical person and efficient cause of a literary text, one is naturally compelled to think that one's own interpretation is the correct one and to proclaim it as such; and that if one is a religious writer, one may feel that one has a duty to insist that the work be read that way. But as an *author*, Kierkegaard readily admits that it does not avail much that one intends this or that.<sup>31</sup> By bringing a text into the public domain the author relinquishes all authority over what it means; the text assumes a life of its own. Now the only interpretation that is entitled to be called correct is that which can be demonstrated on the basis of the text.<sup>32</sup>

In line with the theoretical assumptions of the New Criticism, Kierkegaard holds that statements of authorial intention are in a sense irrelevant because, if the intention can be found in or inferred from the text itself, the statement is superfluous, and if the intention cannot be found in or inferred from the text, the statement is to no avail. This claim rests on an implicit distinction between literary and nonliterary modes of expression. Kierkegaard does not claim that his literary texts do not mean what he intends or understands them to mean; rather he claims that their meaning cannot be judged solely on the basis of his nonliterary statements about them. This is entirely consistent with Kierkegaard's view of himself, *qua* critic, as a reader of the authorship.

It should be clear from the foregoing that Kierkegaard does not begin by disavowing interpretive authority over his texts only to reclaim this privilege in his later writings. Kierkegaard's "point of view" is to be understood as one possible perspective, which the reader may either accept or reject based on his own encounter with the texts. Kierkegaard merely exercises a right reserved by every author, namely, to offer his own interpretation of his work. It follows that a book like *The Point of View* might well suggest a promising way of reading the authorship, whether or not the account it presents can be shown to be "authoritative." For the salient question is not whether Kierkegaard was, as a matter of fact, an author in the service of Christianity, but whether that account of his purpose is corroborated by the texts. From this standpoint, one could argue that the received interpretation of the pseudonymous authorship is still the best and most comprehensive available.

Thirty years ago this interpretation of Kierkegaard would have placed him in the mainstream of literary criticism in America. Since then, however, the New Criticism has gradually faded into the background, and in its place we have seen the steady rise of Deconstructive Criticism and another nineteenth-century philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. Deconstructionists, inspired by Nietzsche's views on reading and textuality, have gone far beyond the formalist attempt to deny authors any special interpretive privilege. By challenging our basic ideas about what a text is, these poststructuralist critics have articulated the problem of reading at a deeper level.

Recently a number of scholars have attempted to resurrect Kierkegaard, too, by proclaiming him a forerunner of the kind of critical work now being done in the postmodern tradition.<sup>33</sup> These commentators have produced highly original and provocative readings of Kierkegaard's texts. Yet there is one common premise that shapes their critical outlook: That the Derridean critique of the metaphysics of presence, on which the deconstructionist project rests, is essentially correct, and that Kierkegaard may be regarded as an early critic of presence. This claim must be examined more closely.

#### KIERKEGAARD AND DECONSTRUCTION

The word "presence," as it is used by Derrida and others, refers to a foundational or self-certifying ground outside of language which guarantees

the meaningfulness of utterances within language. As Jonathan Culler explains:

The notions of “making clear,” “grasping,” “demonstrating,” “revealing,” and “showing what is the case” all invoke presence. To claim, as in the Cartesian *cogito*, that the “I” resists radical doubt because it is present to itself in the act of thinking or doubting is one sort of appeal to presence. Another is the notion that the meaning of an utterance is what is present to the consciousness of the speaker, what he or she “has in mind” at the moment of the utterance.<sup>34</sup>

In opposition to this tendency, Derrida maintains that signs get their meaning not from some extralinguistic reality which they signify, but by virtue of the relations they bear to other signs in the linguistic system.<sup>35</sup> Following Saussure, Derrida conceives of language as a differential system of signs. The signifier “cat” is what it is not because it is directly related to a particular signified, but because it is distinct from other words in the system, such as “mat” and “cad.” The word “cat” is thus inhabited, both phonically and graphically, by the traces of forms one is not uttering, and it can function as a signifier only in so far as it contains these formal traces.

Because the meaning of a sign is differentially defined in terms of what it is not, rather than in terms of some positive relation (e.g. correspondence), its meaning is always in some sense absent from it. Yet, our invincible tendency as competent users of language is to assume that our own meaning can be made present to others; if not in the act of writing, then certainly in the act of speaking. This is reflected in Saussure’s contention that writing is derived from, and hence secondary to, speech. But, as Derrida points out, this privileging of the spoken word merely gives rise to the illusion of the full presence and unity of meaning in the spoken word. Indeed, the assumption of presence characteristic of the history of Western philosophy and linguistics is perpetuated by this “phonocentric” bias, which in turn gives rise to the general tendency to make certain terms more dominant than others in language.<sup>36</sup>

Contrary to traditional semantic theories, Derrida maintains that meaning is not immediately present in any one sign, but is the effect of a potentially endless play of signification. The differences between signs account for the apparent specificity of their significations, and hence for the possibility of intelligible communication. But because these significations can never come to rest in an absolute presence, we are propelled into

an endless regress of meaning. When we look up the meaning of a word in a dictionary, we find a lexicographer's definition. But a lexicographer, as Quine has pointed out, is an empirical scientist, whose business is merely the recording of the meaning speakers have given words in the past.<sup>37</sup> And, as Culler notes, "what is true of a word is true of language in general: the structure of a language, its system of norms and regularities, is a product of events, the result of prior speech acts. But once we take this argument seriously and begin to look at the events which are said to determine structures, we find that every event is itself already determined and made possible by prior structures."<sup>38</sup> No matter how far back we go, even if we try to imagine an originary event that might have given rise to a grounding structure, we discover that we are at a loss to know where to begin. For we must always assume prior organization, prior differentiation. What we ordinarily take to be present is always already a systematic product of differences.<sup>39</sup> Thus we are, as Derrida notes, constantly forced to shift back and forth between the perspectives of event and structure, which leads not to a synthesis but to *aporia* or undecidability.<sup>40</sup>

As a general strategy, deconstruction seeks to expose the inherent contradictions in a text which must be repressed if the text is to be given a univocal interpretation. The deconstructionist points to the fundamental tendency in all metaphysical discourse to repress its *other*. As Christopher Norris explains: "Derrida seeks to disabuse us of the delusions engendered by naive ontologies of language. Deconstruction sets out to demonstrate that meaning can never coincide with its object in a moment of pure, unimpeded union; that language always intervenes to deflect, defer, or differentially complicate the relation between manifest sense and expressive intent."<sup>41</sup> This has profound implications not only for the act of interpretation, but also for the act of self-interpretation. For if meaning is unmasterable, then the author's authority over a text is undermined in a radical way. This form of criticism not only denies interpretive privilege to authors, it denies that there can be any fundamental unity in a text on the grounds that every text already contains the seeds of its own deconstruction.

In a recent essay entitled "Points of View for His Work as an Author,"<sup>42</sup> Louis Mackey challenges the notion that there is any fundamental unity in Kierkegaard's authorship. Despite Kierkegaard's own claim that the strictly religious works provide the point of view from which the others are to be understood, Mackey argues that "the simple contradiction between the aesthetic and the religious writings does not by itself establish an ordering of the texts and an allocation of priorities" (185). The

supposed “organic unity” of the authorship is an illusion created by the repression of difference within the text itself. The problem is not so much that Kierkegaard presumes the authenticity of his account, but that he “presupposes the *possibility* of an authenticity—a singleness of purpose and a coincidence of purpose and performance—against which his experience as the master of a whole troop of pseudonyms . . . should have cautioned him” (187).

Mackey agrees with Fenger, who claims that Kierkegaard’s privileging word “adds just another to the religious works and therefore cannot legitimately ask to be taken as the transcendent perspective that unifies the canon” (186). The difference between their views is that, whereas Fenger points to the “false unity” in Kierkegaard’s writings, Mackey contends that there is no unity at all. In the authorship, the distinction between aesthetic and religious modes of discourse is strictly undecidable. Mackey reasons as follows:

There is perhaps never good reason (even in the “normal” case) to identify the “writer” with the “actual” person whose name he signs, though it is natural to do so. But in the [case of Kierkegaard] the course of nature is blocked by the flagrant interposition of artifice. . . . The proliferation of artifice makes the distinction undecidable and the identity of the natural indeterminable. When a man fabricates as many masks to hide behind as Kierkegaard does, one cannot trust his (purportedly) direct asseverations. And when he signs his own name, it no longer has the effects of the signature. (188)

Thus Kierkegaard’s rhetoric at once asserts and undermines its own performance. His authorship offers us a striking example of how texts are always already in the process of deconstructing themselves.

A similar type of reading is offered by Christopher Norris, who compares the autobiographical narrative of Kierkegaard’s *Point of View* to Rousseau’s *Confessions*, discerning in the former the same ‘subversive’ logic that Paul de Man finds in the latter. Norris summarizes his view in the following passage:

The duplicity of language is always in excess of the elaborate strategies which Kierkegaard adopts to explain and justify his authorial conduct. ~~Thus, *The Point of View*~~, by its complex “dialectical” reordering of memories and motives, creates a text

which partakes as much of fiction as of spiritual self-revelation. De Man describes this alienating logic of narrative contrivance as it affects the writing of Rousseau's *Confessions*. "This threatens the autobiographical subject not as the loss of something that was once present and that it once possessed, but as a radical estrangement between the meaning and the performance of any text." It is especially impossible to decide just how much in *The Point of View* is dictated by a logic of narrative self-vindication basically at odds with Kierkegaard's idea of existential good faith.<sup>43</sup>

However, as Norris also points out, there are other aspects of Kierkegaard's position that make it impossible finally to reconcile him with the deconstructionist project. "It should be obvious," he writes, "that Kierkegaard carries deconstruction only to the point where its strategies supposedly come up against an undeconstructible bedrock of authenticated truth."<sup>44</sup> Underlying the celebrated distinction between objectivity and subjectivity (and the subsequent identification of truth with the latter) is the view that there exists an absolute truth, and that it is possible to be related to this truth in time. The absolute truth cannot be realized through metaphysical speculation, nor through direct communication from one individual to another, but only through the ethical-religious striving of faith.

Accordingly, Kierkegaard does not attempt to communicate directly the truth about human existence, but rather to enable others to discover that truth for themselves by removing the illusion that obscures the real requirements of faith. In *The Point of View*, Kierkegaard explains that "there is a difference between writing on a blank sheet of paper and bringing to light by the application of a caustic fluid a text which is hidden under another text."<sup>45</sup> He complains that the "dishonesty of the age" can be seen in the fact that it attempts to communicate ethical-religious truth directly, as though writing on a blank sheet of paper.<sup>46</sup> But this type of truth can only be appropriated by the existing individual, who recreates it in self-activity. In order to facilitate this activity in his readers, Kierkegaard uses an indirect form of discourse designed to force the reader to turn inward, to rediscover what he refers to as "the original text of the individual human existence-relationship, the old text (*Urskrift*). . . ."<sup>47</sup>

The very idea of revealing the text behind the text is highly problematic for the deconstructionist. What is to guarantee that the removal of one illusion will not merely result in its replacement by another? Nietzsche poses this question in its most acute form by extending the metaphor of

textuality to nature and history. Taken in conjunction with the perspectivist thesis that there is only interpretation, Nietzsche's textualism has the far-reaching implication that there can be no text behind the text, no *Ur-text*. He asks, Why not simply regard the world as a fiction? And if it is suggested that fiction implies an originator, an author, why not suppose that this, too, belongs to the fiction?<sup>48</sup> The proper task of the philosopher, he tells us in *Beyond Good and Evil*, is "to become master over the many vain and overly enthusiastic interpretations and connotations that have so far been scrawled and painted over that eternal basic text [*ewigen Grundtext*] of *homo natura* . . ." <sup>49</sup> Nietzsche not only stresses the epistemological point that all knowing is limited by one's perspective, and hence that all interpretations are essentially incomplete; he goes on to claim that there are no rational grounds for believing in the existence of those things philosophers have traditionally employed to ground interpretations of self and world (including, preeminently, the concept of a Divine Author). Regarding the text of *homo natura* there can be no complete or final perspective, since all texts are constantly in the process of being rewritten. For Nietzsche, to "become master over the many vain and overly enthusiastic interpretations" means to have the courage to explore the limitless play of intertextuality, through which one acquires a deeper understanding of the textual labyrinth that is human existence.

This is precisely the point at which Kierkegaard parts company with deconstructive criticism, which denies the existence of a grounding authenticity. He does not deny that language has the power to mislead, or to create illusion. Deception, he tells us, extends just as far as the truth. But there is a trivial sense in which these statements are true. For we all know that words can be uttered with very different intentions. This admission does not, however, commit Kierkegaard to the undecidability of meaning. Indeed, as a religious writer he regards himself as an instrument of divine Providence whose mission is to make others aware. Providence grounds Kierkegaard's faith in an end to the duplicities of meaning and motive; it ensures that "a tree shall be known by its fruits."

Anticipating the deconstructionist, Kierkegaard acknowledges that if a person is not circumspect in the use of mystification, he may soon find himself in the comical situation of becoming a mystery to himself. But this, Kierkegaard insists, is attributable to a lack of seriousness, which "prompts him to fall in love with mystification for its own sake," instead of using it for a higher purpose. Hence, he writes, "when a mystification . . . is used in the service of a serious purpose it will be so used as merely to obviate a misunderstanding . . . whereas all the while the true explanation is at



hand and ready to be found by him who honestly seeks it."<sup>50</sup> Thus, as Norris points out, "there is always a decisive moment of advance from 'indirect communication' to truth directly apprehended and thus no longer subject to the ruses and dangers of reflection. To ignore this moment . . . is to prove oneself lacking in the 'serious' powers of mind requisite to a higher understanding."<sup>51</sup> The "unreconstructed aesthete," who prefers to play with possibilities and then leave them all unactualized, reveals just such a lack of seriousness. In Kierkegaard's judgment, this is not merely an intellectual shortcoming, it is a moral failure.

There is a striking parallel here between Kierkegaard's position and recent attempts to respond to the deconstructionist on moral and theological grounds. George Steiner, for example, has argued persuasively that without the assumption of presence "certain dimensions of thought and creativity are no longer attainable. . . . We must read *as if*."<sup>52</sup> In his view, any coherent understanding of what language is and how it functions is underwritten by the assumption of presence (3). Indeed, all meaningful encounters with art, literature, and music must presuppose this presence.

Like Kierkegaard, Steiner is aware that there is no end to the possibility of interpretive disagreement. This is an unavoidable feature of all human communication:

Our encounter with the freedom of presence in another human being . . . will always entail approximation. . . . The congruence is never complete. It is never uniform with its object. If it was, the act of reception would be wholly equivalent to that of original enunciation. . . . The falling-short is a guarantor of the experienced "otherness". . . . (175)

But we must also recognize that aesthetic understanding, like any authentic act of human understanding, has a profoundly moral dimension. Interpretation involves a commitment, it requires a response which is, as the word itself suggests, *responsible*. A serious reader must be willing to take risks, to be open to the spirit of the text, allowing himself to be touched by the presence of the other (148,177). These remarks not only echo Kierkegaard's concern about the moral aspect of reading, they also fit well with the theological presuppositions that underlie the production of the authorship.

At the very least, it can be said that Kierkegaard stands in a highly ambiguous relation to contemporary theories of reading and textuality. On the one hand, he anticipates many of the claims of deconstructive criticism.

This is especially evident in his renunciation of interpretive authority with respect to his own texts, but also in his relentless criticism of all metaphysical attempts to systematize existence. On the other hand, however, he provides the reader with a viewpoint that renders deconstruction “at best redundant, and at worst a species of mischievous ‘aesthetic’ distraction.”<sup>53</sup> Kierkegaard’s appeal to a providential ethics of reading, his faith in the existence of an originary text behind the text, poses a formidable challenge to deconstructionist strategies of textual demystification (105f.).

PRESENCE IN ABSENCE:  
A STRATEGY FOR READING KIERKEGAARD

How then are we to read Kierkegaard? To understand the sense in which Kierkegaard is *present* in the authorship, we must first understand the sense in which he is *absent* from it. Here we must say a word about the art of “indirect communication.” This art

consists in making oneself, the communicator, into a nobody, purely objective, and then continually placing the qualitative opposites in a unity. This is what some pseudonymous writers are accustomed to calling the double reflection of the communication. For example, it is indirect communication to place jest and earnestness together in such a way that the composite is a dialectical knot—and then to be a nobody oneself. If anyone wants to have anything to do with this kind of communication, he will have to untie the knot himself. Or, to bring attack and defense into a unity in such a way that no one can directly say whether one is attacking or defending, so that the most zealous supporter of the cause and its most vicious foe can both seem to see in one an ally—and then to be nobody oneself, an absentee, an objective something, a nonperson.<sup>54</sup>

In either case the communicator cancels out, leaving the reader with a dialectical knot that cannot be undone merely by reference to Kierkegaard. The purpose of the indirect communication is to get the reader to see that ethical-religious truth lies in the realm of inwardness and subjectivity, and hence that it must be appropriated by the individual. To the extent that such a communication is successful, the communicator will have been merely an occasion for the reader to make this movement. Kierkegaard’s

model for the indirect form of communication is the maieutic method of Socrates.<sup>55</sup>

Each pseudonymous text is brought forth from the perspective of its author, and is then opened up to interpretation and appropriation from the perspective of its reader. In this way, Kierkegaard recognizes the efficacy of the incomplete as a stimulus for transforming those who read his works. I have suggested that Kierkegaard remains consistent on this point by reducing his own status to that of a reader, and hence one more perspective. On this point, at any rate, Kierkegaard is in substantial agreement with Nietzsche's view that an author's true task is not merely to impart information, but to be an occasion for the reader's self-activity. The conscientious author will always seek to play a subordinate role in the communication process, to serve merely as a contributing factor in the interpretation of the text. For Kierkegaard, writing emerges as a means of communication, not in the sense of a direct transmission of meaning or truth between individuals or between text and reader, but rather as an incitement to further activity in and through the individual's subjective appropriation of ethical-religious truth.

In keeping with his indirect strategy, Kierkegaard does not himself choose between the aesthetic and ethical-religious perspectives. In the pseudonymous works, the contradiction of viewpoint remains unresolved. The pseudonyms thus achieve a kind of ideality that creates poetic distance between the writing self and the written word. "An author," Kierkegaard says, "certainly must have his private personality as everyone else has, but this must be his . . . [inner sanctum], and just as the entrance to a house is barred by stationing two soldiers with crossed bayonets, so by means of the dialectical cross of qualitative opposites the equality of ideality forms the barrier that prevents all access."<sup>56</sup> It does not follow from this, however, that Kierkegaard did not have a specific agenda, or that the authorship was not guided by the religious purpose claimed for it in *The Point of View*. But how does this idea of religious purpose manifest itself in the authorship?

I want to suggest that what Kierkegaard created, consciously or unconsciously, in the process of writing was an implied version of himself. When we read the authorship as a totality, we discover that each work fits into a larger design, which traces out the various moments of an existential dialectic in pursuit of authentic selfhood. Kierkegaard specifically draws our attention to this design in support of his religious interpretation of the authorship. It is, he believes, a design that suggests one kind of author

rather than another, or what Wayne C. Booth has aptly termed an "implied author."

The implied author, as Booth explains, is the organizing principle that gives us a sense from line to line, from book to book, that the author "sees more deeply and judges more profoundly than his presented characters."<sup>57</sup> We infer this author as "an ideal, literary, created version of the real man; he is the sum of his own choices" (75). As a reader of the authorship, Kierkegaard picks out an implied author with whom he identifies himself in the autobiographical writings. Whether or not we accept this interpretation as sincere will depend on whether Kierkegaard has succeeded in establishing the integrity of this author.

Appeal to the concept of an implied author avoids the problem of having to "get it right" in the sense that one latches onto the actual authorial intention behind the work. For the implied author is at once distinct from both the pseudonym and the historical writer. This concept also avoids the problem of what to do with texts without access to authors, as well as the problem of how to judge the sincerity of their authors. Booth and Kierkegaard agree that the literary text is the best evidence we have concerning authorial intention and sincerity. This point is elaborated by Booth in a passage that deserves quoting at length:

It is only by distinguishing between the author and his implied image that we can avoid pointless and unverifiable talk about such qualities as "sincerity" or "seriousness" in the author. . . . But we have only the work as evidence for the only kind of sincerity that concerns us: Is the implied author in harmony with himself—that is, are his other choices in harmony with his explicit narrative character? If a narrator who by every trustworthy sign is presented to us as a reliable spokesman for the author professes to believe in values which are never realized in the structure as a whole, we can then talk of an insincere work. A great work establishes the "sincerity" of its implied author, regardless of how grossly the man who created that author may belie in his *other* forms of conduct the values embodied in his work. For all we know, the only sincere moments of his life may have been lived as he wrote his novel. (75)

Similarly, if Kierkegaard had professed in *The Point of View* to believe in and promote religious values which were never realized in the authorship, then we could raise the question of insincerity. I contend that the internal

structure of the authorship is essentially in harmony with the retrospective account Kierkegaard offers us in his autobiographical writings. The pseudonymous authorship does in fact establish the sincerity of its implied author, regardless of how grossly the historical Kierkegaard may have belied in his other forms of conduct the moral and religious values embodied in it. In the remaining chapters, all references to Kierkegaard should be understood as references to this implied author.

The problem with current deconstructionist readings of Kierkegaard is not that they ascribe to his authorship an indeterminacy of meaning which he would find unacceptable, but rather that they obscure the theoretical assumptions which inform his writing. These include the distinction between literary and nonliterary forms of discourse; the affirmation of the logical and semantic priority of the literary text; the view of the author as reader; and the appeal to an operative or implied author, which is revealed only indirectly in the text.

However, a more important difference between Kierkegaard and deconstructive criticism can be seen in the moral and theological assumptions that shape his view of reading and interpretation. In the light of the nihilistic alternative presented by deconstruction, Kierkegaard urges us to make the interpretive leap of faith and "wager on transcendence."<sup>58</sup> And he does so out of a profound conviction that to break with the "postulate of the sacred," as Steiner calls it, is to forfeit that theological criterion of meaning which underlies the very possibility of authentic selfhood.

Having arrived at a strategy for reading Kierkegaard, we turn now to an examination of the philosophical scope of the authorship.