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A FUNNY THING HAPPENED TO ME ON  
THE WAY TO SALVATION: CLIMACUS AS  
HUMORIST IN KIERKEGAARD'S  
*CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT*

I. INTRODUCTION

Much recent Kierkegaard scholarship has paid particular attention to various aspects of the literary form of his authorship, such as the significance of his writing under various pseudonyms. The focus has been upon 'style' as much as 'content'; the 'how' as much as the 'what' of Kierkegaard's writing. Within this context, James Conant has argued, in a series of articles,<sup>1</sup> that there are important parallels between the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (authored by the Kierkegaardian pseudonym Johannes Climacus) and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. However, Conant argues that these parallels have been misunderstood by previous commentators. The main aim of this article is to challenge Conant's argument that the *Postscript* should be read as containing 'nonsense... simple, old garden variety nonsense'.<sup>2</sup> This, we shall see, relies upon a particular view of the significance of Climacus's 'revocation' of the text. The commentators whom Conant wants to criticize allegedly hold that the *Tractatus* and the *Postscript* provide 'essential preliminary noise'<sup>3</sup> to the realization that those issues which really matter – in particular, ethics and religion – cannot be spoken of. These commentators, according to Conant, insist on the existence of a kind of speech 'that lacks sense while still being able to convey volumes'.<sup>4</sup>

The *Postscript* allegedly exemplifies such speech as follows. The 'subjective truths' of ethics and religion are not expressible in language, but only in the 'existential' context of an individual's life. Moreover, the central distinguishing feature of Christianity – the incarnation – is not only inexpressible linguistically; it also: 'represents the purest antithesis of what is rationally

<sup>1</sup> 'Must we show what we cannot say?' in R. Fleming and M. Payne (eds), *The Senses of Stanley Cavell* (Lewisbury, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989); 'Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense' in Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer and Hilary Putnam (eds) *Pursuits of Reason* (Texas Tech University Press, 1993); 'Putting Two and Two Together' in Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr (eds) *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995); hereafter MWS, KWN and PTTT respectively. Conant's work has influenced other recent writing on Kierkegaard: see, for instance, Stephen Mulhall *Faith and Reason* (London: Duckworth, 1994), especially Chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup> MWS, p. 253.

<sup>3</sup> MWS, p. 249.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

comprehensible. It presents us with the extremest form of nonsense. Notice...the importance of ascribing...an underlying conception of a hierarchy of nonsense.)... [T]he absolute paradox [of the incarnation] can be identified as *the* paradox precisely because it is *absolutely* incomprehensible. Such a paradox presents the ultimate spur to faith, for in its attempt to assimilate the paradox the understanding will recurrently crucify itself and momentarily liberate us from any interference on its part in our relation to God.<sup>5</sup> Though the absolute paradox cannot be stated directly, we can point to its possible existence ‘by demarcating the scope of the understanding and delineating its ultimate limits’.<sup>6</sup> No author can ‘directly *say* anything of meaningful religious import to us’; hence Climacus’s need to ‘revoke’ the text, through which he ‘jettisons the entire structure he has previously constructed, leaving us with a silence in which we are allegedly supposed to be able to discern the distilled content of his project to indirectly communicate to us the nature of the truth of Christianity’.<sup>7</sup>

Conant, by contrast, argues that speech which ‘lacks sense while still being able to convey volumes’ is impossible. For Conant, when Climacus and Wittgenstein each claim, at the end of their respective books, that their work is nonsense (in Climacus’s case, this is the job allegedly performed by the ‘revocation’ of the text in the ‘Appendix’), they mean what they say; what they have each spent the previous pages saying is *plain* nonsense; not, as many commentators have assumed, nonsense which is somehow profound.

## 2. CLIMACUS’S REVOCATION

To tackle this issue, we clearly need to focus upon Climacus’s ‘revocation’. As mentioned above, this takes place in an ‘Appendix’ to the *Postscript* entitled ‘An Understanding with the Reader’. Its form is as follows. Climacus asserts that, although the book is about becoming a Christian, he is not himself a Christian; rather, he says, he is ‘a humorist; satisfied with his circumstances at the moment, hoping that something better will befall his lot, he feels especially happy, if worst comes to worst, to be born in this speculative, theocentric century’ (CUP 617).<sup>8</sup> The humorist has nothing to teach, unlike ‘speculative thinkers and great men with matchless discoveries’ (*ibid.*). Hence the book ‘is about myself, simply and solely about myself’; in particular, it is about how Climacus can relate himself to that ‘highest good in store that is called an eternal happiness’ and which Christianity promises. It

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Quotations which I make from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* are from the translation by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). The only exceptions to this are when I ‘requote’ something already quoted by Conant. In these cases, since Conant quotes from the older translation by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), I have, when ‘requoting’, used this translation too; while nevertheless also giving a reference to the place in Hong and Hong where the relevant passage can be found.

is against this background that Climacus claims that his book is ‘superfluous’ (CUP 618); that it should not be appealed to (*ibid.*); and that he ‘has no opinion’ (‘except that it must be the most difficult of all to become a Christian’ (CUP 619)). Then comes these oft-quoted lines:

Just as in Catholic books, especially from former times, one finds a note at the back of the book that notifies the reader that everything is to be understood in accordance with the teaching of the holy universal mother Church, so also what I write contains the notice that everything is to be understood in such a way that it is revoked [*tilbagekaldt*], that the book has not only a conclusion [*Slutning*] but has a revocation [*Tilbagekaldelse*]<sup>9</sup> to boot (CUP 619).<sup>10</sup>

### 3. HOW SHOULD WE READ THE ‘REVOCATION’?

Our concern here is how this revocation is to be taken. Conant castigates ‘most commentators’ for ‘simply neglect[ing]’ the remarks in which Climacus’s ‘revocation’ appears.<sup>11</sup> The issue, I shall aim to show in what follows, is not whether or not we should neglect it – clearly we should not – but of the *way* in which we should read it; and the relative importance we should attach to it. In this second article, Conant suggests that he agrees with this: ‘I am inclined to think that one will not be in a position to understand either of these books until one has a satisfying account of the spirit in which, in each case, this revocation is intended.’<sup>12</sup> But we shall disagree as to what this ‘spirit’ is.

How, then, should the revocation be read? Note that, after mentioning his ‘imaginary reader’, Climacus remarks of this ‘most pleasant of all readers’ that: ‘He can understand that to write a book and revoke it is not the same as refraining from writing it, that to write a book that does not demand to be important for anyone is still not the same as letting it be unwritten’ (CUP 621). And he goes on to ‘stress a certain honesty that forbids me to parrot what I am unable to understand... an honesty that in turn comforts me and arms me with a more than ordinary sense of the comic and a certain capacity for making ludicrous what is ludicrous’ (CUP 622).

It is important to understand the above if we are to understand the ‘spirit in which the revocation is intended’. As a preliminary, we should observe that Conant is at times unclear as to exactly what Climacus is supposed to be revoking. He claims that the text provides a ladder which, as with the *Tractatus*, we should simply throw away once we have ascended it. So is

<sup>9</sup> *Tilbagekaldelse*: ‘1) recall; 2) revocation, recantation, retraction, withdrawal; 3) cancellation, annulment, repeal’ (Hermann Vinterberg and C. A. Bodelsen (eds) *Dansk-Engelsk Ordbog* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel Nordisk Forlag, 1956)).

<sup>10</sup> I have modified the Hongs’ translation slightly. In this passage, they translate *Slutning* as ‘end’; I have, along with Swenson and Lowrie, gone for ‘conclusion’ because Climacus is here clearly referring back to the section immediately preceding the Appendix. This is also headed *Slutning* in the original text; and both sets of translators have labelled this section ‘Conclusion’.

<sup>11</sup> See MWS, p. 276n22.

<sup>12</sup> KWN, p. 197.

Climacus supposed to be revoking the whole text? Sometimes, Conant does indeed seem to be saying this. For instance, at one point he claims that: ‘The *only* insight these works wish to impart in the end – once the reader has climbed to the top of the ladder – is one about the reader himself: that he is prone to such illusions.’<sup>13</sup> (These illusions, we shall shortly see, are those which give us the impression that we are able to occupy a perspective from which we can grasp the Christian incarnation; that ‘absolute paradox’ which is maximally repellant to reason.) More precisely, Climacus is supposed to be revoking all but the ‘frame’; those sections in which he allegedly provides ‘directions’ for how the text is to be read. This ‘frame’ is supposed to be constituted by the ‘Appendix’, and the earlier ‘Glance at a Contemporary Effort in Danish Literature’, in which Climacus gives his own views on the work of Kierkegaard’s other pseudonyms, and the *Edifying Discourses* penned under Kierkegaard’s own name.<sup>14</sup>

However, elsewhere Conant says that Climacus ‘identifies *only the final doctrine* [the incarnation]; with which the work reaches its climax, as an “absurdity”...the reader...needs to see only that the author’s earlier propositions are marshalled in support of an argument that *eventually culminates* in a piece of nonsense’.<sup>15</sup>

What is allegedly being revoked, then, is rather less than clear. It would be odd if Conant were claiming that only *part* of the non-‘framing’ part of the text should be revoked. If we pay close attention to Climacus’s exact words, we cannot help but notice that they claim to revoke *the whole text*: ‘what I write contains the notice that *everything* is to be understood in such a way that it is revoked’ (CUP 619, my emphasis). So any claim that only *part* of the text is to be revoked is not supported by this vital ‘Appendix’. So let us assume that, other than the ‘frame’, Conant is saying that the whole of the rest of the text is intended to be ‘revoked’ in a certain sense.

### 3.1 Conant on Climacus and nonsense

The sense in which this is so will become clearer if we unpack Conant’s claim that the movement within the *Postscript* is from ‘propositions for which a clear sense can be given (depending upon whether we construe them aesthetically or religiously), to ones which teeter on the brink of sense (where mere truisms are *insisted* upon) to sheer nonsense (an affirmation of objective absurdity)’.<sup>16</sup> Which sections are supposed to be which? The clearest explanation of this comes in Conant’s second article; and an exposition at this point will aid our understanding.

Conant takes Climacus’s main aim to be the essentially Wittgensteinian task of dispelling philosophical confusion. In relation to the *Postscript*’s subject – the problem of ‘becoming a Christian’ – he sees Climacus’s task as being

<sup>13</sup> PTTT, p. 282, my emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> KWN, p. 223n85, my emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> See KWN, p. 202.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

to enable the philosopher to see that this is not an *epistemological* question; what he requires in relation to it is not further *knowledge*. According to Conant, ‘the work as a whole represents an elaborate *reductio ad absurdum* of the philosophical project of clarifying and propounding what it is to be a Christian’.<sup>17</sup>

But the first book of the *Postscript* appears to be involved in exactly such a project. It ‘appears to be concerned to argue that the truth of Christianity cannot be established on objective grounds’;<sup>18</sup> that none of scripture, the Church or the religion’s having survived for centuries, can provide adequate reasons for Christian faith. Conant observes that Climacus appears to be ‘advancing an epistemological argument to the effect that any form of objective reasoning or objective knowledge cannot attain the pitch of certainty that is appropriate to religious faith’.<sup>19</sup> But this way of presenting things ‘invites the reader to picture religious faith as *continuous* with ordinary forms of belief, though somehow fortified with an epistemologically more secure foundation’.<sup>20</sup> It is exactly this kind of talk, according to Conant, that Climacus wishes—indirectly—to question. The philosopher mistakenly construes faith as a kind of *knowledge*. Such ‘dialectical confusion’ arises from his failure to pay attention to the crucial differences in meaning which come about according to whether the terms under discussion are being used in ‘aesthetic’, ‘ethical’ or ‘religious’ contexts.<sup>21</sup> A specifically *religious* use of terms like ‘faith’ or ‘revelation’ only has a sense ‘within the context of a certain kind of life’.<sup>22</sup> But the philosopher tends to be insensitive to this: ‘When he discovers that evidence does not play the role...in a religious context that it would in an ordinary context, the philosopher concludes that evidence must play a *peculiar role*...or... that a peculiar *kind* of evidence must be involved.’<sup>23</sup> But the aim of Climacus’s grammatical investigation ‘is to show the philosopher that appeals to evidence have *no* role to play of the sort that he imagines in the logic of religious concepts such as faith and revelation’.<sup>24</sup> The philosopher tends to overlook the fundamental change in meaning which occurs when such terms are used in religious, as opposed to epistemic, contexts. So this is the section of the *Postscript* which contains ‘propositions for which a clear sense can be given’; *provided* they are construed *religiously*. But the philosopher who reads ‘faith’ as something epistemic is mistakenly construing it ‘aesthetically’.

Next, Conant argues, the *Postscript* deliberately starts going further astray. As the text progresses, rather than sticking to ‘grammatical investigations’, Climacus starts to advance a philosophical *thesis*. That faith and ‘objective’ reasoning are incommensurable is offered as a counter-thesis to the philosopher’s assumption that ordinary belief and religious faith are simply

<sup>17</sup> KWN, p. 207.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> KWN, p. 208.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> I am here using these terms in a Kierkegaardian sense; as the three major ‘existence-spheres’ or ‘stages on life’s way’.

<sup>22</sup> KWN, p. 209.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

different points along the same epistemic spectrum. ‘Rather than simply showing the philosopher that he has run the categories together in a fashion that has led him to speak nonsense, Climacus offer his thesis in the form of the negation of the philosopher’s claim. But the attempt to negate a piece of nonsense results in another piece of nonsense.’<sup>25</sup>

What is the philosopher saying that is supposed to be nonsense? It is those utterances which he makes as a result of his assumption that religious faith and ordinary belief are both epistemological entities. And what is Climacus’s nonsense? Immediately before the above quotation, Conant says that Climacus ‘ends up by representing what is a mere truism as his own intellectual discovery, *his* contribution to knowledge’.<sup>26</sup> This suggests that Conant is objecting to Climacus’s claiming *as a thesis* something which is simply supposed to be obvious once it is pointed out as the result of a grammatical investigation. *So the point is that dispelling confusion should not be presented as offering a ‘thesis’*. To do so is to speak nonsense.

However, Conant continues, Chapter 1<sup>27</sup> appears to build up to just such a thesis: ‘an infinite personal interest, insofar as it is essentially incommensurable with ordinary forms of rational justification, requires a leap of faith – an act of resolve that closes its eyes to the objective probability of the article of faith.’<sup>28</sup> Things starting smelling fishier still in ‘Something about Lessing’ (Part 2, Section 1); which includes a subsection (Chapter 2 of Section 1) entitled ‘Theses Possibly or Actually Attributable to Lessing’.<sup>29</sup> This title is ironic, Conant claims, since attributing ‘theses’ to Lessing would involve missing the latter’s own irony. Lessing *appears* to be offering an argument paralleling the one which Climacus appears to offer; one ‘concerning the impossibility of a rational transition from purely historical (or empirical) grounds to the metaphysical and moral truths associated with the Christian teaching’.<sup>30</sup> But Climacus claims that Lessing in fact intends this ironically. Lessing talks of the ‘ugly broad ditch’ over which he is unable to leap in faith. Climacus focuses upon his saying ‘I cannot cross... however earnestly I have tried to make the leap’, and comments:

‘Perhaps it is also cunning on Lessing’s part to employ the word *ernstlich* [earnestly], because with regard to what it means to leap, especially when the metaphor is developed for the imagination, earnestness is droll enough, inasmuch as it stands in no relation, or in a comic relation, to the leap, since it is not the breadth of the ditch in an external sense that prevents it but the dialectical passion in an internal sense that makes the ditch infinitely broad. To have been very close to doing something already has its comic aspect, but to have been very close to making the leap is nothing whatever, precisely because the leap is the category of decision. And now in utmost

<sup>25</sup> KWN, p. 210.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> I think that he in fact means the *whole* of the *Første Deel* – what the Hongs label ‘Part One’, and what Swenson and Lowrie label ‘Book One’. This in fact has two chapters (*capitel*). But this assumption makes the best sense of what Conant goes on to say next.

<sup>28</sup> KWN, p. 210.

<sup>29</sup> The Hongs translate *Mulige og virkelige Theses af Lessing* more directly, as ‘Possible and Actual Theses by Lessing’.

<sup>30</sup> KWN, p. 211.

earnestness to have wanted to make the leap – yes, that Lessing is indeed a rogue,<sup>31</sup> for surely he has, if anything, with the utmost earnestness made the ditch broad – is that not just like making fun of people!’ (CUP 99)

In other words, both Lessing and Climacus *appear* to be advancing a philosophical doctrine about the nature of Christianity; but should really be seen as *parodying* any such attempt. Climacus’s ‘argument’ culminates in a claim that ‘from the standpoint of objective thought, the object of faith must be maximally indigestible to reason’.<sup>32</sup> Christianity’s superiority lies in its asking us to believe in something – the ‘absolute paradox’ of the incarnation – which requires ‘the complete sacrifice of one’s reason’; a ‘crucifixion of the understanding’.<sup>33</sup> But Conant points out that Climacus also says that ‘Nonsense... [the believer] cannot believe against the understanding, for precisely the understanding will discern that it is nonsense and prevent him from believing it’.<sup>34</sup> Underlying such claims, Conant argues, must be the idea that the believer *retains* his understanding; for it is precisely this which enables him to distinguish between ‘the objective absurdity of Christian doctrine and less repulsive forms of nonsense... Climacus’s analysis therefore commits him to a distinction between mere absurdity and “objective absurdity” – a category of deep nonsense which is supposed to be qualitatively more repellant to reason than ordinary nonsense’.<sup>35</sup> But this view, argues Conant, is itself nonsense. We cannot ‘rank incomprehensible “thoughts” by the degree of their absurdity’.<sup>36</sup> How could we determine that the statement ‘God became man in Jesus Christ’ is more nonsensical than, say, ‘My thoughts smell belligerently’? If it is true that both are nonsense, then that is all there is to it; there is no way that we can judge the former to be *more* nonsensical than the latter. Nonsense does not come in ‘a spectrum of degrees’.<sup>37</sup>

Conant concludes that scholars who have attempted to ‘water down and clean up’<sup>38</sup> Climacus’s argument – thus preventing the *Postscript* from looking like a parody of serious philosophy – have missed the point. ‘When approaching the *Postscript*, a scholarly commitment to adhere at all costs to such a principle of sympathetic textual interpretation – while systematically ignoring what Climacus calls the “incessant activity of irony” in the work – will lead one astray. Indeed this has been the fate of all the standard attempts to extract the argument of the work while ignoring Climacus’s vehement warnings about the work’s peculiar character – in particular, his remark at the end that the book was written in order to be revoked.’<sup>39</sup> Hence

<sup>31</sup> The word here translated as ‘rogue’ is *Skjelm*; an alternative translation, used by Swenson and Lowrie, and which more clearly brings out the ‘comic’ element, is ‘wag’.<sup>32</sup> KWN, p. 215.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> CUP, trans. Swenson and Lowrie, p. 504. Since Conant quotes this passage from the Swenson and Lowrie translation, I have not amended it. The Hongs’ translation of the same passage, which appears on their p. 568, is not different in any significant way.<sup>35</sup> KWN, p. 215.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> KWN, pp. 215–16.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

Conant's final conclusion that: 'The dialectical ladder of the *Postscript* culminates in a demonstration and declaration of the nonsensicality of its doctrine. Its doctrine turns out to be a pseudo-doctrine. It is a ladder which once we have climbed up it, we are asked to throw away.'<sup>40</sup> We have climbed up it, and are ready to throw it away, when, having understood that Climacus is showing us a position from which we shall be led to speak nonsense if we advance certain kinds of theses, 'we are no longer tempted to advance such theses ourselves'.<sup>41</sup>

The above exposition shows us the sense in which Conant is claiming that the whole text is revoked. There is much that is perceptive in this analysis. However, there are problems with Conant's argument itself, and there are also factors he overlooks which are vital to our understanding of the revocation. Let us consider each of these in turn.

### 3.2 *Some criticisms of Conant's argument*

To begin with, I want to consider two problems with Conant's argument. First, Climacus's comment about the 'incessant activity of irony', and the 'parody on speculative philosophy', is in fact made about his other work, the *Philosophical Fragments*, not the *Postscript*.<sup>42</sup> It is of course possible that Climacus might think the same comment can be made about the *Postscript* too, but he does not explicitly say so, and Conant is on very dodgy ground in basing an important part of an argument about one text on the basis of what its author says about another! Moreover, we should note that *Fragments* is *not* revoked.

Secondly, we have seen Conant argue that the *Postscript* culminates in a nonsensical doctrine and that, moreover, we are supposed eventually to see that this is nonsensical. This is apparently shown to us by Climacus's committing himself to an allegedly nonsensical distinction between the 'absolute paradox' and 'less repulsive forms of nonsense'. The problem with this is twofold. Firstly, there is evidence that Kierkegaard himself states a view of the 'absolute paradox' strikingly similar to the view that according to Conant, the *Postscript* is supposed to show up as nonsensical. Moreover, Kierkegaard appears still to have held his view several years after the *Postscript*'s publication in 1846. Secondly, I suggest that Conant misconstrues the sense in which the 'absolute paradox' is more 'repulsive' than other forms of nonsense. It is not so because it is somehow *more* nonsensical than everyday, run of the mill nonsense. The 'repulsion' stems rather from the *offensiveness* of Christianity. Let us address these points in turn.

In relation to the first point, several entries in Kierkegaard's journals hint at the similarity between Climacus's view of the 'absolute paradox' and

<sup>40</sup> KWN, p. 216.

<sup>41</sup> KWN, p. 218.

<sup>42</sup> CUP, trans. Swenson and Lowrie, p. 245n; cf. trans. Hong and Hong, p. 275n.

Kierkegaard's own. These include a reply Kierkegaard wrote to the Icelandic theologian Magnus Eiriksson, who had attacked the former's position on the relation between faith and reason in a pseudonymous pamphlet.<sup>43</sup> In his reply, Kierkegaard addresses Eiriksson thus:

The new and peculiar turn you give to the affair is that you dismiss the whole of Christianity and then, with a triumphant countenance, inquire: 'But where is the paradoxical?' You might better have asked: 'But where is Christianity?'<sup>44</sup>

This suggests that Christianity's very nature is paradoxical; and indeed, Kierkegaard later asserts that 'Christianity is a paradox'.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, in comparing 'faith' in *Fear and Trembling* with 'paradox' in the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard acknowledges that there is a difference, and that this difference centres on the *Postscript's* concern with 'faith in relation to a doctrine';<sup>46</sup> i.e. the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. Moreover, Kierkegaard adds, 'it is one thing to believe in virtue of the Absurd and another to *believe the Absurd*. The first expression is employed by Johannes de Silentio, the other by Johannes Climacus.'<sup>47</sup> In other words, Silentio's notion that the not specifically Christian faith of, say, Abraham is held 'in virtue of the absurd', has been replaced in the *Postscript* with a more concrete *content* – the incarnation – which is *itself* labelled as 'the absurd'. But the 'absurdity' of the incarnation is not presented as a reason to reject it; it simply signals that this is not something rationally comprehensible. In a journal entry of 1850 (the same year as the reply to Eiriksson), Kierkegaard says: 'the concept of the absurd is precisely to grasp the fact that it cannot and must not be grasped. The *absurd*, the *paradox*, is composed in such a way that reason has no power at all to dissolve it in nonsense and prove that it is nonsense; no, it is a symbol, a riddle, a compounded riddle about which reason must say: I cannot solve it, it cannot be understood, but it does not follow thereby that it is nonsense. But if faith is completely abolished, the whole sphere is dropped, and then reason becomes conceited and perhaps concludes that, *ergo*, the paradox is nonsense.'<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> The pamphlet had the less than catchy title *Can Faith Ever be a Paradox? And This Because of the Absurd? A Problem Occasioned by the Book, Fear and Trembling by Johannes de Silentio, Who Is Answered through Private Communications of a Knight of Faith, a Brother of the Knight of Faith, Theophilus Nicolaus*.

<sup>44</sup> Kierkegaard's reply was unpublished, but these and other passages from it are quoted at length in Cornelio Fabro, 'Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard's Dialectic', trans. J. B. Mondin, in Howard A. Johnson and Niels Thulstrup (eds), *A Kierkegaard Critique* (New York: Harper and Bros, 1962), pp. 156–206. This particular quote is on p. 180. This material can also be found in *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*. Vol. 1 (entries 9–12) and 6 (entries 6598–6601), ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967 and 1978 respectively).

<sup>45</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 181. The same or similar claims are made in several journal entries, e.g. entries 3092, 3093, 3095, 3097 and 3098 in *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*. Vol. 3, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975).

<sup>46</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 183, my emphasis.

<sup>47</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 184, my emphasis. Just as Climacus is the pseudonymous author of the *Postscript*, Silentio is the pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling*.

<sup>48</sup> *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, Vol. 1, entry 7. Note also that in this same entry, Kierkegaard identifies at least part of Climacus's work with himself: 'This is what I have developed (for example in *Concluding Postscript*) – that not every absurdity is the absurd or the paradox.'

Note the claim: reason cannot deal with the Christian paradox, ‘*but it does not follow thereby that it is nonsense*’. Conant would have us believe otherwise; and that Kierkegaard’s overall authorial intention is that we are supposed to see this. In fact, Kierkegaard adds to the above the claim that from the standpoint of ‘faith’, what appears from the outside to be ‘absurd’ is ‘transformed’: ‘When the believer believes, the Absurd is not the Absurd – faith transforms it... The passion of faith is the only thing capable of mastering the Absurd.’<sup>49</sup>

Our task here is neither to support nor dispute Kierkegaard’s views on this matter. It is simply to observe that these quotations in Kierkegaard’s own voice are at odds with what Conant would have us believe about the overall authorial intention of the *Postscript*. In other words, Conant’s assumption that the view of the ‘absolute paradox’ expressed by Climacus in the *Postscript* was not Kierkegaard’s own – and that the work itself, read rightly, should enable us to see this – can be questioned by the fact that, writing in his private journal, Kierkegaard expresses views remarkably similar to the readings of the *Postscript* which Conant is keen to dispute. Indeed, in the final sentence of his reply to Eiriksson, Kierkegaard remarks: ‘I would be glad to have another pseudonym, one who does not like Johannes de Silentio say he does not have faith, but plainly, positively says he has faith – Anti-Climacus – repeat what, as a matter of fact, is stated in the pseudonymous writings.’<sup>50</sup>

As an important corollary, we might ask: how *is* the ‘absurdity’ of the absolute paradox different from ‘standard’ nonsense? This brings us to our second point. I suggest that what is supposed to make the ‘absolute paradox’ uniquely ‘repulsive’ is the offensiveness of Christianity, as stressed, for instance, by Kierkegaard in his reply to Eriksson, and by his Christian pseudonym Anti-Climacus in *Practise in Christianity*. Such factors as God’s appearance as a humble carpenter, while yet demanding obedience; His submitting himself to suffering and humiliation while remaining somehow God, means, according to Kierkegaard, that there are two possible responses to ‘true’ Christianity (as opposed to the misrepresentations of it common in ‘Christendom’). The two possibilities are faith or offence. Hence ‘the absurd’, construed as a Christian category, ‘is not nonsense but offence’.<sup>51</sup> The absolute paradox is more offensive than ‘ordinary nonsense’ not because it is simply *more* nonsensical; it is so because, while appearing to be nonsense to those without faith, it demands *existential allegiance*. It is one thing to talk ‘ordinary’ nonsense which is ‘offensive to reason’; for here, we tend to use the word ‘offensive’ in a somewhat metaphorical sense. But it is quite another

<sup>49</sup> Kierkegaard, cited in Fabro, *op. cit.* pp. 182–3.

<sup>50</sup> *Soren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, Vol. 6, entry 6601.

<sup>51</sup> George E. Arbaugh and George B. Arbaugh, *Kierkegaard’s Authorship* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1968), p. 334.

to talk, in J. Heywood Thomas's words, of 'the *scandalon* or the folly which, when believed, is salvation';<sup>52</sup> in other words, for me to claim that your entire life depends upon your existential commitment to something beyond reason. It is this existential dimension that makes Christianity's demands potentially 'offensive' or 'repulsive' to the non-believer in a way that someone's saying 'My thoughts smell belligerently' would not be.

Next, let us to turn to those aspects of Climacus's revocation which I have accused Conant of overlooking.

### 3.3 *Re-reading the revocation: Climacus as humorist*

Our central question, remember, is 'How should the revocation be read?' I submit that this will not be grasped unless we fully unpack the significance of Climacus's description of himself as a 'humorist'. Conant acknowledges this general point, but does not – I shall argue – consider in anywhere near sufficient detail the *Postscript's* account of what it means to be a 'humorist'.<sup>53</sup> What, then, is the significance of Climacus's describing himself as a 'humorist'?

Climacus's revocation must be read in terms of the *modesty* characteristic of the figure he labels the 'humorist'. Against those who could claim for their position that it is The Truth, Climacus is saying something along the lines of: 'This is how it appears to me, but you don't have to listen to me; a mere humorist.' We must, in this connection, pay close attention to Climacus's saying 'that to write a book and to revoke it is not the same as refraining from writing it, that to write a book that does not demand to be important for anyone is still not the same as letting it be unwritten'. Assume, as the sentence structure here suggests,<sup>54</sup> that the parts of this quotation either side of the comma are closely linked. This implies a close connection between writing a book and revoking it, on the one hand, and writing a book 'that does not demand to be important to anyone', on the other. Climacus has written a book and revoked it; and made the link between this activity, and writing a book which does not demand to be important. This supports my claim that the revocation is intended to be read in the above way; as Climacus saying 'That's how I see it, but don't listen to a mere humorist like me'. But it is important that we know *how* to read this: it is a statement of *modesty*; not, as Conant seems to read it, an *instruction* to throw away the main body of the text.<sup>55</sup> There are two closely connected reasons for not reading the 'revocation' in Conant's way. Firstly, issuing such instructions would be

<sup>52</sup> J. Heywood Thomas, 'Paradox', in Niels Thulstrup and Marie Mikulova Thulstrup (eds) *Biblioteca Kierkegaardiana*, Vol. 3, *Concepts and Alternatives in Kierkegaard* (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Boghandel, 1980), p. 199.

<sup>53</sup> The same point could be made of an older, paper to which Conant is indebted, namely Henry E. Allison's 'Christianity and Nonsense', *Review of Metaphysics* 20 (1967), pp. 432–60.

<sup>54</sup> There seems no problem with translation in this respect, since the Hongs' translation seems to me to be faithful to the Danish.

out of keeping with the general spirit of both the ‘Appendix’ and other aspects of Climacus’s self-presentation. And secondly, we should not expect ‘humorists’ – as Climacus describes them – to be so authoritarian.

### 3.3.1 *Climacus’s self-presentation*

How can the above claims be justified? In relation to the first point, recall, as quoted earlier, that part of the ‘Appendix’ in which Climacus describes himself as a humorist. Conant claims that Climacus here issues ‘vehement warnings’<sup>56</sup> as to how his work should be read. But this ‘vehemence’ is difficult to find. By contrast, I suggest that the two particularly striking aspects of Climacus’s self-presentation are his *modesty*, and his *lack of a sense of urgency*. Modesty, in that Climacus claims to have no doctrines to teach (‘To be an authority is much too burdensome an existence for a humorist’ (CUP 618)); and the lack of a sense of urgency, in that he is ‘satisfied with his circumstances at the moment, hoping that something better will befall his lot, he feels especially happy, if worst comes to worst, to be born in this speculative, theocentric century’ (CUP 617). These two are linked: his happiness to have been born in such a century can be explained by the portion of the sentence which immediately follows the first quotation in the above sentence, in which Climacus says that a humorist ‘regards it specifically as one of life’s comforts that there are such men who are able and willing to be the authority’ (CUP 618–19). If it might be thought that these remarks are no more than ironic, note that these characteristics are echoed by other passages in which Climacus talks about himself, such as the section in which he describes how he came to try his hand as an author.<sup>57</sup> To illustrate my point, it is important to quote from this at length:

It is now about four years since the idea came to me of wanting to try my hand as an author. I remember it very clearly. It was on a Sunday; yes, correct, it was a Sunday afternoon. As usual, I was sitting outside the cafe in Frederiksberg Gardens, that wonderful garden which for the child was the enchanted land where the king lived with the queen, that lovely garden which for the youth was a pleasant diversion in the happy gaiety of the populace, that friendly garden which for the adult is so cozy in its wistful elevation above the world, that garden where even the envied glory of royalty is what it indeed is out there – a queen’s recollection of her late lord. There as usual I sat and smoked my cigar. Regrettably, the only similarity I have been able to detect between the beginning of my fragment of philosophic endeavour and the miraculous beginning of that poetic hero was that it was in a public place. Otherwise there is no similarity at all, and although I am the author of *Fragments*, I am so insignificant that I am an outsider in literature. I have not even added to subscription literature, nor can it truthfully be said that I have a significant place in it.

<sup>55</sup> While he does not use precisely this language, recall the earlier point that in his second article Conant describes ‘An Understanding ...’ as part of the ‘frame of the work’ which is intended to ‘provide directions for how to read it’ (KWN, p. 202; my emphasis). <sup>56</sup> KWN, p. 216.

<sup>57</sup> This occurs in the last pages of Part Two, Section Two, Chapter One: ‘Becoming Subjective’.

I had been a student for half a score of years. Although I was never lazy, all my activity was nevertheless only like a splendid inactivity, a kind of occupation I still much prefer and for which I perhaps have a little genius. I read a great deal, spent the rest of the day loafing and thinking, or thinking and loafing, but nothing came of it... of all comforts, indolence is the most comfortable.

So I sat and smoked my cigar until I drifted into thought. Among other thoughts, I recall these. You are getting on in years, I said to myself, and are becoming an old man without being anything and without actually undertaking anything. On the other hand, wherever you look in literature or in life, you see the names and figures of celebrities, the prized and highly acclaimed people, prominent or much discussed, the many benefactors of the age who know how to benefit humankind by making life easier and easier, some by railroads, others by omnibuses and steamships, others by telegraph, others by easily understood surveys and brief publications of everything worth knowing, and finally the true benefactors of the age who by virtue of thought systematically make spiritual existence easier and easier and yet more and more meaningful – and what are you doing?

At this point my introspection was interrupted because my cigar was finished and a new one had to be lit. So I smoked again, and then suddenly this thought crossed my mind: you must do something, but since with your limited capabilities it will be impossible to make anything easier than it has become, you must, with the same humanitarian enthusiasm as the others have, take it upon yourself to make something more difficult. This idea pleased me enormously; it also flattered me that for this effort I would be loved and respected, as much as anyone else, by the entire community. (CUP 185–6)

I do not wish to deny that there is irony in this passage. But neither do I see any justification for dismissing it as ‘merely’ ironic. Rather, we are here given important clues about aspects of Climacus’s character. Note, as before, the modesty of his denial of being anything special. Unlike the ‘prized and highly acclaimed’, his own ‘limited capabilities’ prevent him from contributing to humanity by making life easier in some way. Although he had published one book prior to the *Postscript*, he did so at his own expense and remains ‘an outsider in literature’. (Elsewhere, he tells us that this book has had no impact, attracting only one review.<sup>58</sup>) Even more striking is the lack of a sense of urgency that leaps out from this self-description. He wanted to ‘try his hand as an author’ as long as four years ago, but there is no suggestion that he set to the task straight away (‘... of all comforts, indolence is the most comfortable’). Indeed, it is the *thought* of having discovered a task for himself that pleases him, rather than what arises from the task itself. All the aspects of Climacus’s self-presentation and prose-style – the long digression about Frederiksberg Gardens; the fact that his ‘activity was...like a splendid inactivity’, since he spent much of his day ‘loafing and thinking, or thinking and loafing’ (he has time to give us this combination both ways around); the fact that relighting his cigar is a more pressing demand than continuing his train of thought – all this indicates a person who is, to say the least, in no

<sup>58</sup> CUP, p. 274n.

great hurry. And this is some distance from what Conant detects: Climacus as an issuer of ‘vehement warnings’ as to how his work should be read.

But these aspects of Climacus’s character should come as no surprise. For Climacus’s own account of what it means to be a ‘humorist’ explains why we should *expect* such a figure to have an attitude and view of himself which is both modest and ‘laid-back’. It is to this that we should now turn.

### 3.3.2 *What does it mean to be a humorist?*

Climacus tells us quite a lot about the life-view of a ‘humorist’; the majority of which Conant ignores. In the context of the present discussion, there are two particularly important points to note. Firstly, humorists – unlike ‘ironists’ – are concerned with predicaments shared by *all* human beings. Secondly, for the humorist – unlike for the Christian – there is no sense of urgency about the human condition, since our ‘goal’ is ‘behind us’; whatever salvation may be available to us, is assured. Let me explain.

In relation to the first point, we should note that Climacus does not, unlike most contemporary humour theorists, take ‘humour’ as an all-encompassing umbrella term for anything perceived as funny; a category of which irony (along with, say, jokes, satire and wit) would be a sub-category.<sup>59</sup> Rather, Climacus’s umbrella term is ‘the comic’, and irony and humour are the two subsections thereof which he discusses in detail. One of the most important distinctions between irony and humour, as Climacus uses the terms, is that humour is rather more *gentle* than irony, in the following sense. Whereas irony is proud, and tends to divide one person from another – at one point, Climacus talks of irony in terms of self-assertion and ‘teasing’ (CUP 551) – humour is concerned with those laughable aspects of the human predicament which we all share; hence Climacus’s description of it as ‘sympathetic’ (CUP 582) and ‘profound’ (CUP 552n).

The second point is related to this. Irony and humour have similar roles as ‘border territories’ between the ‘aesthetic’, ‘ethical’ and ‘religious’ existence-spheres which are pivotal to the thought of both Climacus and Kierkegaard. At one point, Climacus asserts: ‘irony is the *confinium* [border territory] between the aesthetic and the ethical; humour the *confinium* between the ethical and the religious’ (CUP 501–2).<sup>60</sup> How does this work?

Consider irony first. An ironic view of life stands between living aesthetically (where one lives for ‘the moment’, with no overriding plans or life-

<sup>59</sup> My claim that ‘humo[u]r’ is the main umbrella term in contemporary usage is supported by the fact that the scholarly journal devoted to various aspects of the study of jokes, cartoons, irony, satire, wit etc. has taken as its name *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*. This same usage is also made by John Morreall in his collection of the thoughts of philosophers from Plato to the present on these subjects (John Morreall (ed) *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987)).

<sup>60</sup> For the sake of consistency, I have, throughout this article, anglicised the spelling of terms such as ‘aesthetic’ and ‘humour’.

goals) and living ethically (where one commits oneself to ‘eternal’, universal values). This is so because the ironist has realized the limitations of living aesthetically. That is, he has realized that the aesthete endlessly toys with and reflects upon various existential possibilities, but perpetually postpones vital decisions concerning his own existence, and that this perpetual ducking of existential questions prevents his ‘becoming a self’. However, the ironist has nothing positive to offer in the place of aesthetic existence. He is not prepared to make the concrete commitment to ‘the eternal’ which is characteristic of the ethical.

The relationship of humour to the ethical and religious existence-spheres is more problematic than the relation of irony to the aesthetic and the ethical.<sup>61</sup> However, all that matters for the present discussion is the difference between humour and Religiousness B (Christianity), since it is clear that humour, for Climacus, stands somewhere between ethical and Christian living. Whatever their exact relationship, it is clear that Religiousness A and humour have some important things in common. As C. Stephen Evans puts it, both the person in Religiousness A and the humorist believe ‘like Socrates and Plato, that the eternal is something that all humans possess already’.<sup>62</sup> From the standpoint of Religiousness A, ‘it must be assumed that every human being, viewed essentially, participates in... eternal happiness and finally becomes eternally happy’ (CUP 581). According to Climacus, this is essentially the view shared by the humorist, as exemplified by his attitude to suffering. The humorist, like the Christian, ‘has an essential *conception* of the suffering in which he is [but] revokes the suffering in the form of jest’ (CUP 447). In other words, he has an *intellectual* understanding that suffering is essential to human existence, ‘but at the same time it occurs to him that it most likely is not worth the trouble to become involved in explaining it. The revocation is the jest’ (CUP 448). Thus, for the humorist, there is no really *momentous* distinction between those within and those outside a religious mode of existence. The standpoint of Religiousness B, however, is different: ‘Only on this condition do I become blessed, and as I absolutely bind myself to it, I thereby exclude everybody else’ (CUP 582). The Christian, according to Climacus, has a ‘pathos of separation’ which involves ‘the pain of sympathy’ (CUP 582). Within Religiousness A, one can

<sup>61</sup> In particular, there is some debate as to whether humour is on the boundary between the ethical and Religiousness A; or whether it borders Religiousness B, humour somehow being incorporated within Religiousness A. (According to the *Postscript*, Religiousness A is a form of ‘immanent’ religiousness in which eternal truth is held to be humanly accessible through ‘recollection’. Religiousness B, by contrast, holds that for it to be possible for humans to relate to eternal truth and attain salvation, ‘the eternal’ must have entered human history. This is Christianity; and the event in history which makes salvation possible, according to this view, is God’s incarnation as Christ.) For a brief overview of different scholars’ positions on the relation between humour, Religiousness A and Religiousness B, see Sylvia Walsh *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard’s Existential Aesthetics* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 212–213n.

<sup>62</sup> C. Stephen Evans, ‘Kierkegaard’s view of humor: must Christians always be solemn?’, *Faith and Philosophy* 4–2 (1987), p. 182.

sympathize with ‘every human being *qua* human being’ (CUP 585); within Christianity, that ‘sympathy’ can only be with other Christians. So in virtue of his faith, the Christian, according to Climacus, is conscious of himself and his kind as being fundamentally different from non-Christians. What matters about this for our purposes is as follows. The sense of us all being in the same existential boat which is present in Religiousness A (and which can thereby bring about ‘sympathetic humour’ (CUP 582)) is absent from the Christian who lives with the view that salvation is dependent upon each individual’s commitment to God through Christ, and the anguish of being unable ‘to win’ for Christ his family or beloved (CUP 586).

Thus the lack of urgency of a humorist such as Climacus should come as no surprise. Why? Because of the clear distinction between the humorist and the anguished Christian living the life of suffering for his faith.<sup>63</sup> The distinction is this: while the Christian *lives* the suffering and anguish of religious existence, the humorist, thinking that nothing can be done about the suffering that is the human condition, chooses to laugh about it; comforted by his view that ‘the goal [of existence] lies behind’ (CUP 449); that whatever salvation is available, is available to all. Striving is unnecessary, since however much we strive, in the end ‘everyone advances equally far’ (CUP 450).

Let us review the above argument. I am suggesting that Climacus’s revocation should be understood in the light of his description of himself as a humorist. Both Climacus’s self-description, and his account of what it *means* to be a humorist, give us reasons to expect him to lack a sense of urgency, and to have a sense of modesty. Both factors should be taken into consideration when assessing how Climacus’s revocation of his work should be read. And this gives us cause to doubt whether this revocation should be understood as a warning or ‘directions’ for how to read the work.

Yet Conant, as we have seen, assumes that the revocation *is* such a set of directions. Such an assumption lies behind his reference to the *Tractatus*’ ‘self-annihilating Kierkegaardian format’.<sup>64</sup> But *is* the *Postscript* ‘self-annihilating? If my suggestions above are correct, we have good reason to doubt whether Climacus himself – still less Kierkegaard – intends his revocation to ‘annihilate’ the rest of the text in this way. Rather, I have suggested, he is simply denying that he is any *authority* on the matters on which he has been ruminating.

Linked to the above are other reasons to question on Conant’s approach to the ‘revocation’. Conant seems to assume that we can take Climacus’s revocation ‘straight’; and as ‘gospel’. I now turn to questioning each of these assumptions.

<sup>63</sup> Climacus is unclear as to where those fully in Religiousness A fit within this framework. But as we have said, for our present purposes, we need only compare the humorist with the Christian.

<sup>64</sup> MWS, p. 247.

3.4 *Should we read the revocation 'straight'?*

Firstly consider the idea of reading Climacus's revocation 'straight'. The problem with such an assumption is this: Why should the 'Appendix' (and the 'Glance') be the only parts of the text which we read in this way? Might not *Kierkegaard* – as opposed to Climacus – be communicating something indirectly here? The fact that Climacus describes himself as a 'humorist' is important in this regard. Kierkegaard (as opposed to Climacus) is using this fact indirectly to say: if you listen to a humorist, then the message is 'Understand this text is something to be revoked'; as – we might say – an elaborate joke. But we have been told at great length that the humorist and the Christian will see the world differently. As Evans puts it, whereas the humorist stops at 'jest', the Christian sees things as 'a blend of jest and earnestness'.<sup>65</sup> This – and our discussion above – suggests the following interpretation. Recall Climacus's remark that, after seeing suffering as essential to existence, the humorist 'revokes the suffering in the form of jest' (CUP 447). Now supposing the revocation of the whole text at the end is *itself* a kind of jest? In other words, that Climacus has the humorist's characteristic of 'humorously' revoking at a certain point. Such a humorous revocation is appropriate because of Climacus the humorist's beliefs about our having 'the eternal' already within our possession; that 'the goal lies behind' (CUP 449). Because of this view, he reckons that explaining many things is 'most likely not worth the trouble' (CUP 448); he is not particularly bothered whether we have the same world-view that he does, since nothing much – and certainly not our salvation – depends upon this. But it certainly does not follow from this that Kierkegaard's overall authorial intention has all along been deliberately to 'have us on'.

How might Conant respond to this? One way of putting my interpretation would be to say that I want to take 'straight' Climacus's claim to be a humorist; and *not* to take 'straight' the revocation (I accept that *Climacus* is revoking; but not that this message is coming from *Kierkegaard*, who, as someone in or closer to Religiousness B than Climacus, will see life differently). But suppose Conant wanted to do the reverse, drawing on his view that the revocation is supposed to 'annihilate' the rest of the text; suppose he wanted to claim that amongst the things revoked are Climacus's numerous claims to be a humorist. How could we decide between these readings?

Here, I suggest, is the crucial point. As we saw in our earlier summary of his revocation, Climacus repeats his claim to be a humorist *in the 'Appendix' itself*. So Conant has to ignore the significance – as explained above – of Climacus's claim to be a humorist *even in part of that crucial section which contains the revocation around which his reading of the Postscript revolves*. Whereas I am

<sup>65</sup> Evans, *op. cit.* p. 184.

suggesting that Climacus revokes the text, but *qua* humorist; Kierkegaard (*qua* ‘Christian-religious’ indirect communicator<sup>66</sup>) is slyly telling us that this is just what we should expect from a self-confessed ‘humorist’ like Climacus. Ultimately I am saying: Why should we take Climacus’s view of his own writing to be *Kierkegaard’s* view, any more than we should take the work of, say, the aesthete A in Volume 1 of *Either/Or* to be so?<sup>67</sup> Climacus’s telling us that he is a humorist – and explaining in the main text what this means – is a reason not to do so. Granted, we have been given this explanation in the text that Conant often seems to be claiming is intended to be nonsense. But I do not see any reason to view Climacus’s remarks on irony and humour as nonsensical; nor does Conant claim them to be so. And I would argue that I am being more consistent in my reading in that Conant overlooks the importance of that part of the section he wants to stress which is not convenient; that is, the part of the ‘Appendix’ in which Climacus says he is a humorist.

To be fair to Conant, we should point out that in two places, he does explain what *he* thinks is the significance of Climacus’s describing himself as a humorist; but this, I shall now argue, is inadequate. ‘The humour of Climacus’s doctrine’, Conant tells us in the first article, ‘is that it gradually subverts any possible hope for a ground upon which the integrity of a distinction between the absurdity of the paradox and mere nonsense could be drawn.’<sup>68</sup> Now we might well ask: is that all? Why should we accept that this, and this alone, is ‘the correct point of departure’<sup>69</sup> of understanding what Climacus means when he describes himself as a humorist? Why is there no need to consider the lengths to which Climacus goes to distinguish irony from humour; the outlook of the humorist from that of a Christian, and so on? If he were to assert that there is no need because these discussions occur in the (revoked) main text, Conant would owe us an explanation as to why we should view Climacus’s remarks on irony and humour as nonsense. Moreover, Conant’s overlooking the fact that Climacus distinguishes irony from humour leads him to blur what is, for Climacus, an important distinction. He does this when he simply maps the contemporary understanding of ‘humour’ as an all-encompassing umbrella term on to Climacus’s description of himself as a humorist, by quoting a passage in which Climacus in fact talks about *irony*. According to Conant, in a passage crucial to the ‘frame’ of the

<sup>66</sup> Recall Kierkegaard’s claim, in *The Point of View for my Work as an Author*, that the ‘entire purpose’ of the pseudonymous authorship was ‘religious’. At one point, Kierkegaard says: ‘Once and for all I must earnestly beg the kind reader always to bear *in mente* that the thought behind the whole work is: what it means to become a Christian’ (*The Point of View*, trans. Walter Lowrie (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 22n.) And *The Point of View* is, its subtitle informs us, ‘a *direct* communication; a report to history’.

<sup>67</sup> Although Conant, not unreasonably, castigates other commentators for conflating Climacus and Kierkegaard, he is not above doing this himself. See section 3.5 of this article for an example.

<sup>68</sup> MWS, p. 261.

<sup>69</sup> MWS, p. 280n.

work, Climacus says that what caused the reviewer of *Philosophical Fragments* to have ‘the most mistaken impression one can have’ of that text was that he managed to ‘leave out the humour’<sup>70</sup> No; ‘humour’ is the wrong word here, given Climacus’s very definite usage of that word to mean something more gentle than irony; as focusing upon aspects of the human predicament which we all share, rather than as a catch-all term which would include even the most savage, ‘unsympathetic’ irony. What Climacus *actually* says is that the reviewer has gone wrong in omitting to mention ‘the indefatigable activity of *irony*, the *parody* of speculative thought in the entire plan, the *satire* in making efforts as if something *ganz Außerordentliches und zwar Neues* [altogether extraordinary, that is, new] were to come of them, whereas what always emerges is old-fashioned orthodoxy in its rightful severity’ (CUP 275n, my emphases).<sup>71</sup> Irony, parody, satire: all branches of ‘the comic’ (Climacus’s all-encompassing term), but no mention of ‘humour’ (in Climacus’s very *specific* sense of the term). This quotation clearly cannot be used, therefore, as Conant attempts to use it; to provide ‘the correct point of departure’ for explaining Climacus’s claim to be a ‘humorist’. (Note, too, that this explanation comes from Conant’s being forced to rely, for *his* explanation of what Climacus means by his claim that he is a humorist, on a part of the text which is the ‘frame’ of the work.)<sup>72</sup>

Conant offers a similarly ‘minimal’ reading of Climacus’s description of himself as a humorist in his second article, when he quotes Climacus’s remark that he has ‘a more than ordinary sense of the comic and a certain capacity for making ludicrous what is ludicrous’ (CUP 622). But he does not quote what Climacus goes on to say immediately afterwards: ‘Strangely enough, I am unable to make ludicrous what is not ludicrous – that presumably requires other capacities’ (CUP 622). This, I suggest, is a reference to the claim Climacus makes earlier on, that there is a form of religiousness – the ‘religiousness of hidden inwardness’ which borders on Religiousness B – which is ‘inaccessible for comic interpretation’ (CUP 522). But my main point here remains what it was in relation to the mention of the humorist in Conant’s first article. Namely, that while he is right to suggest that Climacus’s self-description ‘should cause us to carefully consider what sort of conviction he has in the doctrines he sets forth’,<sup>73</sup> Conant’s own consideration is not detailed enough. As I have been arguing, a more careful consideration of what Climacus takes a ‘humorist’ to be will suggest different conclusions to Conant’s.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Conant actually quotes essentially the same passage as this, but does not notice that there is a problem in conflating irony, parody and satire with ‘humour’.

<sup>72</sup> We might also note that if, as Climacus claims in the above quote, the parody is in the *plan* of the *Fragments* (and I can see that this might indeed be the case for the layout of the *Postscript* too), there is no need to infer from this that the text *itself* (in the case of the *Postscript*) is parodic. Conant does make this inference – but note that Climacus doesn’t claim that the actual *text* is parodic.

<sup>73</sup> KWN, p. 201.

I have argued that there are good reasons not to ‘throw away’ the content of the *Postscript*. *Pace* Conant, I would support Evans’s view that Climacus’s revocation ‘must be taken as expressing his own attitude toward the book, not as an “objective” judgment that the book contains no serious content. A humorist will therefore read the book in the same spirit as it was written, a [Christian] religious individual rather differently’.<sup>74</sup> In other words, we are not compelled to take Climacus’s revocation ‘straight’. But there is another perspective from which Conant’s position can be criticized. Let us finally deal with this.

### 3.5 *Is Climacus’s view ‘gospel’?*

Should Climacus’s revocation of his own work be taken as ‘gospel’? What I mean by this is that Conant seems to assume – and to castigate ‘most commentators’ for failing to recognize – that Climacus’s is the final word on how the reader with integrity should approach the text. In other words, Conant’s work assumes an implicit ‘ought’ with regard to the act of reading. The reader *ought* to follow Climacus’s ‘directions’ and revoke what has been said. This is the assumption which seems to underlie the following worry: ‘one of the difficulties of writing about Kierkegaard ... is learning to live with the delicate burden of both facing up to and yet not collapsing under the burden of the following thought: how would *he* respond ... to what I have just written about him?’<sup>75</sup>

But why is Conant so concerned about this kind of ‘faithfulness’? Stephen Emmanuel points out that ‘it is a more or less received opinion amongst 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’.<sup>76</sup> This, of course, has been an issue in aesthetics and literary theory since Wimsatt and Beardsley’s classic paper on the so-called ‘intentional fallacy’; and, in a very different theoretical tradition, in the work of Barthes and the ‘death of the author’ school of literary studies. My point here is not to claim that a ‘received opinion’ is an indubitable truth, but rather to point out that this view of the meaning of a text appears to be the view of both Kierkegaard and Climacus. Firstly Kierkegaard. In a passage Conant is fond of quoting but here seems to overlook, Kierkegaard himself renounces any privileged perspective with regard to the views of the pseudonyms: ‘There is in the pseudonymous books not a single word by me. I have no opinion about them except as a third party, no knowledge of their meaning except

<sup>74</sup> C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript: the Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1983), p. 204. (Evans himself asserts this view, rather than adequately supporting it.) I have added the word ‘Christian’, since Evans’s exact phrasing raises questions about humour’s relation to Religiousness A which, while important in their own right, need not concern us here.

<sup>75</sup> MWS, p. 279n29. Note that Conant here seems to conflate Climacus and Kierkegaard, despite having criticized other commentators for doing this.

<sup>76</sup> Stephen M. Emmanuel *Kierkegaard and the Concept of Revelation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), p. 8.

as a reader.<sup>77</sup> Secondly, Climacus himself. In the ‘Glimpse’ – an essential part of the *Postscript*’s ‘frame’, remember, according to Conant – Climacus praises the other pseudonyms because they have ‘not said anything or *misused a preface to take an official position on the production*, as if in a purely legal sense an author were the best interpreter of his own words’ (CUP 252, my emphasis). If issuing ‘directions’ on how to read a work would be a ‘misuse’ of a preface, clearly the same would apply to doing so in an appendix. Yet while Conant claims that this is what Climacus is doing, Climacus’s own words – and words found within the ‘frame’ to boot – tell us otherwise. This is further support for my earlier claim that Conant’s reading of the ‘frame’ on which his interpretation depends is highly selective.<sup>78</sup>

#### 4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Let us review the above arguments. We have been considering Conant’s claim that the *Postscript* – like the *Tractatus* – contains material that is simply nonsensical, and that we are supposed to be able to see this if we read the text alright. Conant is wise to focus attention upon Climacus’s revocation of the text. But the ‘absolute paradox’ with which the text culminates is not intended to be read as simple nonsense. In arriving at such a view, Conant overlooks the fact that the views on the ‘absolute paradox’ expressed in Kierkegaard’s journals (and by the Christian pseudonym Anti-Climacus), seem the same as those of Climacus. The ‘absolute paradox’ differs from ‘simple, old garden variety nonsense’ not in being ‘more nonsensical’ than such ‘ordinary’ nonsense, but in being *offensive* owing to the *existential allegiance* which it demands. Also, in reading the revocation as ‘directions’ for how to read the *Postscript*, Conant provides no reasons to show that this is not simply a *modest denial of authority* on Climacus’s part. Close attention to Climacus’s self-presentation shows this modesty, together with the lack of a sense of urgency, to be an important aspect of Climacus’s character. This is, in fact, connected to the next argument, in which we accused Conant of reading Climacus’s revocation too ‘straight’. He pays insufficient attention to Climacus’s description of himself as a ‘humorist’; the clues the *Postscript* gives us as to the humorist’s *tendency* to issue ‘revocations’; and the difference between the outlook of a humorist and that of a ‘Christian-religious’ individual which indicates that we are in no way compelled to take such revocations too seriously. The revocation is *one* view – that of a ‘humorist’ – on how the text can be read. Linked to this, we questioned, finally,

<sup>77</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, ‘A First and Last Declaration’, appended to the end of the *Postscript*, p. 626, following Climacus’s ‘An Understanding with the Reader’, and signed ‘S. Kierkegaard’.

<sup>78</sup> In KWN, Conant suggests the following way of reading the *Postscript*: ‘if what one seeks is a mode of writing that can help the philosophically-inclined reader to overcome his “forgetfulness”, then what is required is a literary form which will avoid “dogmatizing” and which allows the author “to withdraw himself” in such a manner that the reader is left to confront himself’ (KWN, p. 204). But a pseudonymous author issuing ‘directions’ as to how his work should be read is hardly going to achieve this end.

Conant's taking Climacus's revocation as 'gospel', in view both of literary theoretical denials that authorial intent determines textual meaning, and of the fact that the literary theorist's view about how the work should be read is clearly shared by both Kierkegaard and Climacus. If these literary theorists are right, of course, we need not pay any attention to either Kierkegaard's or Climacus's views of how we should read them. But our point in this last regard has been to support our earlier claim that Conant's reading of what is supposed to be the 'frame' of the *Postscript* is highly selective, since in one place – the revocation – he wants to *follow* the 'directions' Climacus allegedly issues as to how his work should be read, and yet in another part of the 'frame' – that part in which he castigates authors who take an 'official position' on how their work should be interpreted – to *ignore* them. By contrast, my reading of the revocation as a 'humorous', modest denial of Climacus's having any authority does not face such a problem.

More generally, I have argued that we need to take seriously the idea that a consideration of why Climacus describes himself as a 'humorist' – and the clues the text gives as to what this means – are vital to an understanding of the *Postscript*. This idea – hinted at by both Allison and Conant but not really developed by either – deserves further exploration. The present article has attempted to set the ball rolling in this direction.<sup>79</sup>

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