*How to edit, how to read**

Roger Poole

At last Søren Kierkegaard is beginning to get the attentive reading he deserves. Hegel and Marx, Nietzsche and Freud have all had their day, but Kierkegaard has always rolled along as a kind of fifth wheel. It was suspected that he was as great as the others, but no-one could quite say why. That was partly because he existed, for decades, only in the hasty and sometimes impressionistic translations of the Rev. Walter Lowrie, who began to translate him in the late 1930's and early 1940's. These translations were indeed 'works of love'. Lowrie's translation of *The Concept of Dread,* for example, was completed 'in a month of thirty-one days, working twelve hours a day'. In the 1980's however, the Princeton edition called *Kierkegaard's Writings,* edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong began to appear, and these are scrupulously academic translations, with a plethora of learned notes. The edition is complete now—the last of the 26 volumes appeared in 1998.

In all this, the Danes themselves played little part. For them, Søren Kierkegaard was an irritation almost too great to borne while alive, and a bore to talk about ever since. The Danes could never understand why, from the 1950's on, there was a steady stream of scholars and philosophers, coming to Copenhagen, nosing around the second-hand bookshops in the hope of finding first editions of Søren Kierkegaard. Only in the 1990's did the penny finally drop. A huge grant was made in 1993 by the Danish National Research Foundation, to the tune of 27,500,000 Danish kroner, and a Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre was set up at the University of Copenhagen, under the direction of a handful of Danish scholars, with the aim of setting up and publishing a critical edition of his complete works. Thus, only 138 years late, the Danes took official cognisance of their greatest literary son. The edition, in 55 volumes, with an electronic version to follow, is about to roll off the press. The first five volumes of text and commentary were available as of 10 October 1998.

Meanwhile, ancillary volumes concerning textual matters, editing philosophy, electronic information, principles of editing are also appearing. The *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* 1996, a massive volume of some 577 pages, and representing what would appear to be the first volume of a yearly output on this scale, has just seen the light of day.

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At 178 Deutsche marks a copy, it will have no private sale whatever, and one must hope that even libraries are, under the present conditions, willing to buy in volumes so expensive. But if later volumes of this series are anything like as good as the first, then Kierkegaard is going to be one of the most expertly edited, and hence one of the most theoretically important, writers in the early 2000's. For electronic editing, and the philosophy thereof, is at the moment in a fascinating condition of theoretical awareness. Gone are the old hopes of the 'master text', the one and only text as it left the Master's hand and in exactly the verbal form in which he would have wanted posterity to have it. Now the theoretical situation is more or less the opposite: all manuscripts, typescripts, proofs uncorrected and 'corrected', and editions, are taken to have equal validity and interest in the study of the ways in which text will emerge onto the world stage. Indeed, that text is itself in a state of constant vacillation and change. The electronic age means that all is in flux: the fixity of the printed, 'received' text, is now gone.

Thus is it that the last quarter of this volume is made up of essays setting out the critical principles on which the new edition of Kierkegaard will be founded. Johnny Kondrup's 'Critical Directives for *Søren Kierkegaard's Writings* (SKS), with special reference to the printed writings' occupies some thirty pages of guiding principles, in paragraphs 1 to 6 all subdivided 1, 1 .1, 1 .2 etc. To emphasise the truly European scope of this new edition, Johnny Kondrup's essay is then reproduced word for word in German. This is followed by an essay by the formidable Joakim Garff on the principles which should guide the construction of the commentary. 'Regulations for the composition of a historical/factual commentary' (*realkommentarer*) makes it plain that the notes will give only information of a primary kind. Commentary must restrict itself to 'realia in the first potency', or factual matters only to the first power. Nothing interpretative is to be allowed in. This essay too, like Johnny Kondrup's, is reproduced word for word in German. There follows an essay 'On the Contents, Structure and Functions' of the new edition by Finn Hauberg Mortensen, and finally, looking forward to the electronic form of the enterprise, a short but dense essay by Karsten Kynde, called 'Appearance, Rendering, and the Abstract Intention of the Text', deals with philosophical matters such 'The Letter', 'The Word', 'The Line', 'Ambiguity', 'Arbitrariness', 'Storing the Intention' and 'Choosing encoding format'. The eighth and final section, 'Concluding Remarks' shows that holistic philosophical and semantic principles will govern the edition in order to present 'the abstract intention of the text' faithfully.

If the electronic and editorial procedures lying behind this new

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edition are of the highest modernity, the state of the art in what concerns hermeneutics is in a state of disarray, however. By far the greater part of this volume is taken up by a series of critical essays on the meaning and structure of *The Sickness unto Death*, a work published by the pseudonym Anti-Climacus which appeared in 1849. The opening propositions of this work are famous for their difficulty and obscurity, and there is a whole history of modern interpretation. One of the most ingenious and radical solutions has been offered, over the years, by Michael Theunissen, going back to his dissertation in 1958, and finding expression most cogently in his book *Der Begriff Verzweiflung: Korrekturen an Kierkegaard* which appeared in 1993. Two leading scholars, Alastair Hannay and Arne Grøn replied to him in the pages of *Kierkegaardiana* in 1994, and both Hannay's and Grøn's essays are reproduced in this book, together with a long reply, in his turn, by Theunissen to them. This debate thus has the status of a *locus classicus*. Into this debate come remarkably erudite contributions by Hermann Deuser, Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Heiko Schulz, while Alastair Hannay has a further paper in which he replies to the reply to his reply to Theunissen.

Since Kierkegaard's work is obsessively about the nature and degrees of the lived experience of despair, *The Sickness unto Death* has a modernity which very few of his works seem immediately to possess. Indeed, this essay by Anti-Climacus seems to join on seamlessly to the 1942 essay by Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which begins "There is only one truly philosophical problem, and that is suicide." And the shadow of the fear of suicide falls everywhere in Kierkegaard's essay of 1849. He had lived through three years of ridicule and excoriation by the gutter press, and had many times (his Journal shows this clearly) reached that point of loneliness and despair where he must have considered the razor in the bathroom. Yet, time and time again, Kierkegaard rallies. Like Gerard Manley Hopkins he can exclaim:

> Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feed on thee,
> Not untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man
> In me or, most weary, cry *I can no more*. I can,
> Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.

The Sickness unto Death, as the Contents page informs us immediately we open the book, is Despair. So far so good, and there would not seem to be any possible ambiguity about this. Yet, with his very first propositions Anti-Climacus so muddies the water, that interpretation begins from that point.

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The Problem : Condescending to the author.

For Anti-Climacus begins, not with a study of despair itself, but with a consideration of what a 'self' is, and which 'selves' may or may not 'authentically' have despair. To give some idea of the degree of imbrication, I cite the three propositions here:

> Despair is a sickness of the spirit, of the self and so can have three forms: being unconscious in despair of having a self (inauthentic despair), not wanting in despair to be oneself and wanting in despair to be oneself

I cite from Alastair Hannay's own translation in the Penguin Classics, p.43. One can see from this layout of the problem, that difficulties are going to abound: indeed, the whole point of writing in this style is to get writing going, and to let the writing do most of the work.

But, instead of starting in with the modalities of despair, criticism traditionally attacks the most heavily defended point of this line, the concept of the 'self. It was Michael Theunissen's suggestion that we should invert this procedure, and instead of asking in what ways the 'self' can entertain despair, we might rather 'use despair, in a certain sense , as a point of departure and allow it to dictate what a self is' (this formulation is taken from an essay published in 1981, in *Kierkegaard's Truth: The Disclosure of the Self*, in a volume edited by Joseph H. Smith, from Yale University Press). But, in any case Theunissen hangs on to the concept of the 'self' very tight, and makes the next step in the fatal dance, by ignoring, deleting or bracketing the first of the three propositions. Just because Anti-Climacus says that the first form of despair is 'inauthentic', Theunissen makes the second proposition the first (i.e. the first form of 'authentic' despair) and the third form into the second. One third of the problem is thus sliced away from the outset, a procedure followed by most commentators anyway, and certainly by Hannay as well.

The problem again : Careless Reading

This is a fatal mistake. Unless we are to consider Anti-Climacus as a shoddy writer who can't even remember his own three categories during the course of his own first page, there is just no way that we can exclude the first proposition on the grounds that the first kind of 'self' has 'inauthentic despair'. (There is a problem, or difficulty, even with that phrase: Lowrie has 'Despair improperly so called' while Howard and Edna Hong have 'Not despair in the strict sense').

In fact, though, even by line two, the translators have missed a vital point. Kierkegaard does not write that despair 'has three forms'

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(or 'a triple form' as Lowrie has it). He writes that despair is 'et Tredobbelt', a three-doubled thing, in other words, it is always and by definition split into two, and since there are three-by-two forms of it, we are faced with a six-fold relationship between the conscious self, the unconscious self (Kierkegaard does not have access to the Freudian term, but he is quite at ease with the concept) and the self in despair.

If, in other words, the translators had not assumed that Anti-Climacus was simply making a stylistic hash of his own opening propositions, and had noted the arithmetical implications of 'three-doubled', much of the re-ordering of parts two and three of the opening propositions would not have been necessary, and the argument would not have run into the ditch quite so early in the commentaries.

This assumption, that Kierkegaard was disregarding the self which has 'inauthentic' despair (Kierkegaard's word is 'uegentlig') has had yoked to it the idea that Kierkegaard was not dealing with the unconscious. Yet surely, this essay speaks from, and to, the unconscious, and has to do with those brooding and unnamed and unnameable terrors which invade the consciousness of the subject most of the night. Hence it is, that both Michael Theunissen's and Alastair Hannay's (and later, Arne Grøn's and even Niels Jørgen Cappelørn's) attempts to re-order, or make sense of, propositions numbers 'two' and 'three' (re-numbered after the excision of number 'one') go deeper and deeper into the semantic mire. Indeed, some of Alastair Hannay's sentences, admirable though they may be in their evident desire to hunt down a final conceptual quarry, are almost unintelligible in the fineness of the distinctions they make. And this is the more striking, because Kierkegaard himself never defines what he means by a 'self'.

Another problem: Kierkegaard has read Derrida

As Alastair Hannay himself wittily says, Kierkegaard does not ever bother to define his terms. This is an amazing fact about a text, and a writing style, which exists purely as an endless series of distinctions between one thing and another. If only this fact about the writing had been noted, then certain kinds of effort to 'nail' exactly what it is that 'Kierkegaard' is saying would not have been necessary in the first place: because the meaning of a text like *The Sickness unto Death* takes place in an endless series of deferrals of 'meaning' in the strict sense. The text is more like an Impressionist painting, where one dab of colour is added on to another, and gradually, shapes and suggestions emerge. The fact that this book is written by the pseudonym Anti-Climacus, who therefore by necessity is opposed to

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the views of that Johannes Climacus who wrote *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, is, by tradition, always ignored as a mere irritation in learned philosophical debate. If Kierkegaard's texts were looked at more like the canvases of Monet, or even Turner, rather than those of Poussin, we should at last get to grips with the kind of writing that we are being offered.

Another problem: antithetical pseudonyms

The point about the difference between Anti-Climacus and Johannes Climacus is in fact deftly made by Alastair Hannay in the Introduction to his translation of *The Sickness unto Death*, where he cites Kierkegaard's Journal:

> 'While J. Climacus places himself so low that he even admits to not being a Christian, Anti-Climacus gives the impression of taking himself to being a Christian to an extraordinary degree... I put myself higher than J. Climacus, lower than Anti-Climacus' (Papirer X^1 A 517, cited in Hannay at p.15).

So, we can clearly see, that the 'meanings' expressed in the texts of Johannes Climacus are necessarily different from those expressed in the texts of Anti-Climacus, and both are different from the private thoughts of S. Kierkegaard Esq. If this principle were observed in the hermeneutical act, so much blunt reading could have been avoided.

Helping poor Kierkegaard out

So what then is the value, philosophically considered, of the eight linked and interlinked essays about the 'self' in *The Sickness and Death* which make up the first 170 pages of the volume? Theunissen advances a 'negativistic' theory that despair consists in not wanting to be the human being one is, and consists of a flight from our given selfhood. Theunissen's *Grundsatz*, as Hannay calls it, is 'Immediately we do not want to be what we are (in ourselves, our pre-given *Dasein*, and our human being') (p.16).

As against that, Alastair Hannay himself advances what seems to be the more likely solution: that 'the fundamental form that despair takes ... is that of aiming at, or willingly accepting specifications of selfhood that do *not* have the form of a selfhood established by God' (p.18). 'Defiance' (Trods), for example, which plays such a powerful role in the argument, is for Hannay 'the refusal to face up to the rigours of God-established selfhood.' Hannay's calm, patient unravelling of the text moves always from the assumption that despair would not be described in such endless detail if there were not some use to be made of it. Thus there is, for Hannay, such a thing as 'the

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properly despairing self (p.18). Despair amounts to 'not wanting to be the God-established self one is' (p.20). Hannay, thus, interprets positively, while Theunissen moves from a negative, largely non-theological, assumption.

Arne Grøn takes the possibility of 'unconscious' despair seriously, at last, but immediately moves to reading Anti-Climacus as if he were Hegel, seeing the procession of 'forms' (Gestalten) of despair as following each other in a kind of *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (pp. 109-114), although he does see this procession of forms as what he calls 'a negative Phenomenology'. But in Grøn, this tendency, so marked in the critical and scholarly literature, to treat the work of an ironical and distanced 'mask' which a *pseudonym* is, as if it were the 'paragraph communication' of an Idealist philosopher lecturing *ex cathedra*, is inimical to a proper 'reading' of the way in which *Sickness unto Death* works—for it does work, as a literary text.

Likewise the infinitely learned Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, one of the editors of the new edition, also regards *Sickness* as a direct communication when he comes to write his essay, wittily entitled 'In the beginning was the despair of the Bourgeois' (Spiessbürger, Danish Spidsborger, a term of mild humorous contempt). He attempts to 'nail' the problem of meaning by treating the problem of the composition and lay-out of the first part of the work with relentless seriousness and concentration, moving from a diagram of the lay-out. (p. 131), through a really concentrated analysis of the structural sub-sections one by one, thus A, A.A, A.B, A.C, B, C, & c., each sub-section described with bristling technical correctness. He picks up and supports Arne Grøn's case about 'inauthentic' despair, suggesting that the truly inauthentic despair is that of the Copenhagen bourgeois of 1849, who not only does not know that he is in despair, but does not know that he does not know it. 'Der Spiessbürger sich seine Unwissenheit in einer geradezu triumphierenden Geistlosigkeit gut gesichert hat' (p. 143).

'Blunt reading'

But, however these critical Laocoon's struggle with the enfolding limbs of the serpent doubt, there will never be a solution because they all fail to remember that they are reading a literary text, which has its own laws and its own rhetorical devices. There are three levels of misprision operative in what I have come to call 'blunt reading'. There is, firstly, a failure to reckon with the fact that all Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works are precisely that, pseudonymous, and that the pseudonyms do not agree with each other, and that the pseudonymns are not reducible to 'Kierkegaard's' view. Although lip-service is paid to that here and there in every critical essay, it is never seriously entertained, nor are the implications of it realised.

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The second level of misprision operative in 'blunt reading' is the failure to take account of the all-pervasive irony. Kierkegaard was "so through and through polemical that it is really terrible", as one of his friends once said to him. And the work of Anti-Climacus is thus an ironic treatment of the theological textbook, such as those of his despised lecturers at the University. But it also ironises all sorts of other text-books which work through 'paragraph communication.' With every line of *The Sickness unto Death*, it is the reader who is on trial, not the author. 'What is being ironised here? Can you see it? Do you get the point?' — this is the constant quizzical enquiry of the fratelli Climacus. The efforts of the exegetes of the Mid-Western school in the USA would have made Anti-Climacus smile happily. The greatest put-on of all time is *The Concept of Dread*, which is flat out, helter skelter, goodhumoured, ironic pastiche of a famous psychology primer of the time by Karl Rosenkrantz (1837).

The third level of misprison operative in 'blunt reading' is the failure to recognise artistic form, what Coleridge would have called 'organic form', the form that a literary work has to have if it is to fulfil its own nature.

Coitus reservatus

The Sickness unto Death consists of two parts. All through the first part, the essential term you need to make sense of what Anti-Climacus is saying, or seems to be saying, is missing. Maddened, frustrated, the reader is desperate to find the clue he needs to find his way out of this Hegelian Lego. And then, with the very first line of the second Part, the entire text is electrocuted backwards, and the first half suddenly makes luminous sense. It makes luminous sense because the term necessary to its comprehension has at last been supplied. Part Two begins 'Despair is Sin'. Suddenly it all makes sense. But only a writer, writing at the top of his bent and in the fullness of his creative power, could *withhold* the key term for a whole half of the work, and then introduce it dramatically, in the first line of Part Two, such that the reader realises he has been wasting his time all through the horrors of Part One. That is a major writer at work.

Sin, of course! Despair is sin. All through Part One, the reader has been worrying about something, and here it is—the obvious thing, (obvious though only in the way "the purloined letter" is obvious when hanging from the wall):

> *A. Despair is Sin*
> Sin is: *before God, or with the conception of God, in despair not wanting to be oneself or wanting in despair to be oneself*
> (Hannay's translation p. 109)

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That three-part definition matches, copies, imitates and fulfils the three-part set of propositions at the beginning of Part One. The problem of the 'first' form of despair in Part One, the so called 'inauthentic' despair, now disappears. It was simply the despair of those who were not 'before God, or with the conception of God'. Simple. But only a writer of the first order, a writer who can withhold a key term for half a work, and introduce it to such effect at the beginning of the second half, thus 'solving' the apparent problem in the lay-out of the three propositions at the beginning of Part One, could have written a cadenza of this kind.

They can't go on. They'll go on.

However far the technical and formal and editorial expertise of the new 55-volume edition of *Kierkegaard's Writings* may go, there will be no progress made towards the establishing of a correct hermeneutic attitude, until the fact that Kierkegaard is first and foremost a writer, is taken account of. 'Blunt reading' will have to come to a stop. Yet, in the ever-increasing flow of monographs and dissertations, it shows no sign of doing so.

For those who soldier on, however, beyond the eight essays on *The Sickness unto Death* in this first volume of the *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, there is a sign of hope in the writing of Joakim Garff. In an essay called 'Johannes de Silentio: Rhetorician of Silence', an impressive beginning is made on the kind of hermeneutics I am advocating. Because it treats of another work (*Fear and Trembling*) and because it is part of a series of interlaced texts which all have something to contribute to Garff's total case, I cannot begin to describe it here. Suffice it to say, that it follows the publication of his major work *"The Insomniac": Kierkegaard read aesthetically / biographically* which appeared in 1995. Never has the constant to and fro between the *bio* - and the *-grafein* been so deftly taken account of. For anyone who wanted to engage with this first volume of the *Yearbook*, I would recommend starting with Garff's essay, for then he or she will be sensing the future of Kierkegaard studies, whatever may be the fate of the 55-volume edition, with learned notes "to the first potency only", and on electronic CD.

* edited by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Hermann Deuser, Berlin and New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1996, 577 pages, 178.00 Deutsche Marks.

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