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Climacus the (multi-dimensional) humorist: interpreting 'An understanding with the reader'

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Abstract. 'An understanding with the reader' which appears as an appendix to Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* has puzzled readers by apparently 'taking back' everything that the pseudonymous author Climacus has said in the text that precedes it. I agree with John Lippitt that this 'revocation' should be read as a humorous statement; however, I disagree with Lippitt's assessment that the tone of the revocation is essentially 'non-urgent' and 'modest'. I propose that a fuller picture of Climacus's character is needed to understand the spirit of the revocation and its relationship to the rest of the text.

I

Rarely does an appendix draw as much attention as 'An understanding with the reader', which appears at the end of Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*,[1] has recently drawn from scholars. Over the past few years, these seven seemingly unassuming pages of text have generated a provocative – as well as important – line of discussion centring on the enigmatic 'revocation' of the book by the pseudonymous author Climacus. Of particular interest in this debate are the contributions of James Conant and John Lippitt; Conant argues that the revocation should be taken as a signal to the reader that all the text that has come before it has been pure nonsense,[2] Lippitt that the revocation should be interpreted merely as a humorous statement, in accord with Climacus's description of himself as a humorist.[3]

While both Conant and Lippitt make very important contributions to the interpretation of the revocation – contributions which I wish to build upon in this paper – I would argue that neither one does sufficient justice to the *tone* of this revocation, though Lippitt comes closer than Conant. I would

[1] All references to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (*CUP*) refer to the translation by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). From this point on, all references to this work will appear parenthetically in the text.

[2] Conant's argument appears in the following three articles: 'Must we show what we cannot say?', in *Senses of Stanley Cavell* (Cranbury NJ: Associated Presses, 1989) 242–283; 'Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and nonsense', in Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam (eds.) *Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavel* (Lubbock TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1993); 'Putting two and two together', in Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhn (eds.) *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief* (New York NY: St. Martin's Press, 1995) 248–331.

[3] John Lippitt 'A funny thing happened to me on the way to salvation: Climacus as humorist in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*', *Religious Studies*, **33** (1997), 181–202.

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agree with Lippitt that Conant errs by interpreting the revocation in a much too serious manner, not taking into account Climacus's humorous leanings. On the other hand, Lippitt pushes the issue too far in the opposite direction when he insists, rather one-sidedly, on characterizing Climacus as an essentially 'non-urgent' and 'modest' 'speaker whose attitude toward his work is 'This is how it appears to me, but you don't have to listen to me; a mere humorist'.[4] In short, I think that Lippitt paints an inadequate, because oversimplified, picture of Climacus's character, one that seems to detract from the vitality of Climacus's enterprise. I want to argue that Climacus has something more in mind than a 'modest denial of authority'[5] when he revokes the *Postscript*. This 'something more' is the profundity that humour always expresses and which distinguishes it from irony, another form of the comic that, according to Climacus, ' … quite properly says less … ' (*CUP*, 552).

In order to 'fill in' some of the gaps in Lippitt's portrayal of Climacus's humorous character – and, therefore, in his understanding of the revocation – I will examine three key concepts which are central both to Climacus's explanation of the revocation at the end of the book and to his description of the humorist in general. These three concepts are: the relationship of 'jest' to revocation, the superfluity of explaining totality categories, and the humorist in relation to responsibility to the community. First, it is important, if one is going to consider Climacus's revocation as humorous, to examine specifically the meaning of 'revocation' to a humorist. I will argue that Climacus's understanding of revocation is related to his concept of 'jest' in such a way that revocation is necessary to humour itself. Second, since what we are talking about is revocation of a *text*, it seems meaningful to address Climacus's assertion that a humorist is one who takes all *documentation* of suffering as superfluous. In the Appendix, Climacus describes the text of the *Postscript* as superfluous, which, I will argue, suggests not that it is untrue, but rather that it cannot claim to represent the whole. Finally, it is worth pointing out that, for Climacus, humour always involves building relationships with other people. In other words, it is impossible to be a humorist by oneself. This observation will lead me to a discussion of the role of Climacus's 'imaginary reader' and finally to examine the nature of his denial of authority.

I will consider each of these three points in greater detail in the course of this paper, but first I would like briefly to outline the main arguments of Lippitt's article, since his perceptive observations provide a good deal of the foundation that I will later be building upon.

[4] Lippitt, 'A funny thing …', 191.

[5] *Ibid.*, 202.

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II

As I said earlier, Lippitt's article is mainly a reaction against James Conant's claim that the text of the *Postscript* is to be understood as a 'ladder' which the reader should throw away once she realizes that the text is actually made up of carefully constructed nonsense whose purpose has been to 'deceive' the reader into thinking that she can make out distinctions that do not really exist. One of the most effective methods which Lippitt employs to argue against such an interpretation is to point out that holding such a view creates the difficulty of having to separate out which portions of the text should be considered as 'the ladder' and which parts as true communication. Furthermore, he criticizes Conant for wavering on the issue of just what portion of the text Climacus wants the reader to discard. At times, Conant suggests that the reader should throw out everything except what he calls the 'frame' of the text – made up of the Appendix and the 'A glance at a contemporary effort in Danish literature' – which he feels give instructions on how to read the text. In another place, Conant argues that it is only the doctrine of the Incarnation that Climacus is really interested in defining as nonsense, and the text that comes beforehand, while not necessarily nonsensical itself, builds up to this final nonsense.[6]

There are two grounds on which Lippitt disagrees with Conant's argument that the *Postscript* culminates in a nonsensical doctrine of the paradox. First, he claims that there is evidence that Kierkegaard himself espouses a view of the 'absolute paradox' similar to Climacus's. Second, he says that Conant misinterprets the sense in which the 'absolute paradox' is more repulsive than ordinary nonsense. This repulsion, Lippitt argues, is not the result of the 'absolute paradox' being more nonsensical, but rather it is the result of its capacity to be offensive. The absolute paradox, according to Lippitt, 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'.[7] Lippitt argues that the absolute paradox is more offensive than garden-variety nonsense because it is offensive to reason to be told that one's entire existence depends upon believing something that is beyond reason.[8]

Against Conant's view that Climacus's revocation should be read as 'instructions' to throw out the book, Lippitt argues that one is obligated to interpret this revocation in light of the modesty which is characteristic of humorists. He gives two reasons for not reading the revocation as containing 'instructions' to the reader. The first (and the most important, from the point

[6] *Ibid.*, 188.

[7] *Ibid.*,189.

[8] *Ibid.*,190–191. In addition, I would suggest that offence at the absolute paradox is also related to its persistence in accusing the individual, that is, of suggesting that the individual's estrangement from God is his own fault.

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of view of my paper) is that such a reading would be 'out of character' for Climacus, based on the way he has presented himself in other parts of the text. The second, related reason is that a humorist would never think to be so authoritarian as to tell the reader what to do.

Climacus's self-presentation, as Lippitt sees it, consists of 'modesty' and a 'lack of a sense of urgency'. According to Lippitt, Climacus is modest in the sense that he claims to have no doctrines to teach. Lippitt sees lack of urgency in Climacus's claim 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 a speculative, theocentric century' (*CUP*, 617). These remarks might be seen as ironic, Lippitt says, if '… these characteristics weren't echoed by other passages where Climacus talks about himself, such as the section in which he describes how he came to try his hand as an author'.[9] Though there is irony present in this passage, Lippitt argues, there is no justification for considering it as *merely* ironic.

Next, Lippitt goes on to examine two points which specifically come from Climacus's description of the humorist (as opposed to the preceding observations, which are based on Lippitt's perception of Climacus as a character). First, Climacus says that humorists, as opposed to ironists, deal with situations shared by all human beings. Irony may be self-asserting, but humour deals with the human condition, '… hence Climacus's description of it as "sympathetic" and "profound"'.[10] Secondly, Lippitt suggests that the reason that Climacus has no sense of urgency is because, as a self-proclaimed humorist, he senses that the goal of life is 'behind us'. Like religiousness A, Lippitt says, humour suggests the belief that the eternal is something that human beings already possess.[11] In religiousness A, the individual is concerned with 'finding' the truth that is within him or her, while the humorist is of the opinion that it really is not worth the trouble since it is all the same in the end anyway. The humorist has an intellectual understanding of suffering as part of human existence, but he does not have passion concerning this. Humour and religiousness A also share the characteristic of being able to sympathize with every human being. This is where Christianity differs from both humour and religiousness A; a Christian, according to Climacus, has a 'pathos of separation' and can only sympathize with other Christians.[12] So, '… while the Christian *lives* the suffering and anguish of religious existence, the humorist, thinking that nothing can be done about it, chooses to laugh about it…'[13] and is comforted by the opinion that the goal of life lies behind and is equally available to everyone, regardless of the effort one puts forth to obtain it.

In the final section of his essay, Lippitt questions Conant's approach of reading Climacus's revocation 'straight'. Why should the Appendix and the

[9] *Ibid.*, 192. [10] *Ibid.*, 194. [11] *Ibid.*, 195. [12] *Ibid.*, 195.
[13] *Ibid.*, 196.

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'Glance' be interpreted this way and not the rest of the text, he asks. Climacus's revocation can just as easily be read as a humorous jest. Climacus is not really concerned about whether or not his readers share his opinions because nothing really rides on it; he cannot do anything to change the existential situation. Lippitt accepts the argument that *Climacus* is revoking the text, but denies that we should assume that Kierkegaard, who presumably is higher than Climacus, will see the text in the same way as a humorist would. That is, it is possible that Kierkegaard, who is *not* a humorist and *not* in the habit of humorously revoking what he says, will not think that the issue in Climacus's book is not worth explaining. Climacus's view of his own work does not say anything at all about what Kierkegaard thinks about it or, incidentally, about how the reader should interpret it.[14] Even Climacus, Lippitt reminds the reader, suggests that an author's interpretation of his or her own work is not necessarily the best.[15]

III

If one is to understand Climacus's revocation as a humorous one, it is necessary to examine carefully Climacus's statements about the relationship between revocation and jest. More specifically, it is important to ask what exactly is the nature of the humorous jest. First, Climacus says that the humorist understands suffering as something that stands in relation to existence, 'but it is then that the humorist makes the deceptive turn and *revokes the suffering in the form of jest*' (*CUP*, 447, emphasis mine). This seems to suggest that the humorous jest is a specific *type* of revocation, one that involves a 'deceptive turn'. This deception is not, however, meant to harm the hearer in any way or even to make fun of his naiveté. Climacus illustrates this point in the story of the humorist's conversation with the unfortunate man. In this story, the 'unfortunate man', who has just experienced some sort of tragedy in his life, says to the humorist, 'all is lost for me'. The humorist immediately agrees with the unfortunate man, and begins to lament the suffering of all mankind. This initial reaction leads the unfortunate man to believe – correctly, Climacus would say – that the humorist has understood. The 'deceptive turn' comes at the last moment when the humorist annuls what he has just said by mentioning the first particular case of suffering which comes to his mind, however trivial. In Climacus's example, the humorist says, '… if I could only live to see the day when my landlord had a new bell pull installed …. I would consider myself extremely happy'(*CUP*, 449). Though this statement may come across as highly insensitive, Climacus stresses that it is meant in no way to 'affront' the unfortunate man. The misunderstanding is that the unfortunate man actually believes that there is a distinction

[14] *Ibid.*, 198.

[15] *Ibid.*, 201.

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between fortune and misfortune, while the humorist, who sees suffering as the totality, has no use for making such a superficial distinction – except in a comic sense. 'Humour discovers the comic by joining the total guilt [or, in this case, suffering] together with all the relativity between individuals. The basis of the comic is the underlying total guilt [or suffering] that sustains the whole comedy' (*CUP*, 554).

The deceptive aspect of the jest is that one has been led to expect that the humorist is on his way to explaining something profound, but then he suddenly turns in the opposite direction and says something commonplace. 'The humorist comprehends the profundity, but at the same time it occurs to him that it most likely is not worth the trouble to become involved in explaining it. *This revocation is jest*' (*CUP*, 448, emphasis mine). That is, the revocation is not serious; it belongs to the realm of humour, the only place where jest is proper. It is also important to note that the revocation always comes at the last moment, which suggests that there is at least a possibility that it will *not* come. It is a last minute decision that teeters on the edge of wanting to understand the profundity of life and being overcome by the feeling that this is a hopeless task. Climacus describes the moment of the revocation as a moment characterized by 'impatience' on the part of the humorist (*CUP*, 554). This impatience, one will notice, is at odds with Lippitt's claim that the humorist experiences no urgency; for a person who lives calmly, who does not feel a strong need to do any particular thing, will hardly have reason to feel impatient.

However, it is easy to see where Lippitt finds the language to back his 'no urgency' claim. Climacus explains that the humorist, who is at the point of explaining everything, revokes it all 'because the explanation lies behind' (*CUP*, 450). Lippitt suggests that this is a point of intersection between the humorous and religiousness A. The humorist, like the believer in religiousness A, believes that the truth is within every human being. The humorist's attitude toward this is that if the truth is within each person from the very beginning, why take the trouble to take time to find it; it's not going anywhere, and in the end every person is equally capable of finding the truth whether he tries to or not. Climacus affirms this interpretation when he imagines the humorist saying that he sees no reason to try to find the answer to the riddle of life, since, after all, God is the one who made the riddle up in the first place, God has known the answer all along, and presumably He will get around to explaining it to everybody eventually. He thinks that the riddle of life will work something like the riddles in the newspaper; the answers will be printed the following week for everyone to see (*CUP*, 451). This interpretation would seem to be in support of Lippitt's claim that Climacus the humorist does not act with any sense of urgency – why bother?

There is, however, an additional possibility for interpreting the idea that the explanation lies behind. This is illustrated by the story of the humorist's

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visit to the physician's office. The humorist goes in to see the physician complaining of not feeling well, and after asking the humorist about his daily habits, the physician concludes that he is not feeling well because he drinks too much coffee and does not walk enough. Upon receiving this diagnosis, the humorist goes home, immediately stops drinking coffee and adopts a strenuous routine of daily walking. Three weeks pass, and the humorist still does not feel well. He returns to the same physician, who this time tells him that the reason for his illness is that he does not drink enough coffee and he walks too much. In this story the explanation is 'behind' in the sense that the 'reason' for the humorist's current condition is always attributed by the physician to his past habits, and contradictory habits are said to 'cause' the same situation. Thus, the humorist concludes, it is meaningless to attempt explanations. This conclusion, I would argue, results from frustration and is not the result of mere cigar-smoking 'lack of urgency'. The humorist has *tried* to cure his illness, he may even desperately *want* to cure his illness; the problem is that any attempt he makes will just be butting his head against the wall.

In addition, if the humorist sees the truth as always 'lying behind', there is a sense in which it cannot be counted as total disengagement when the humorist revokes, because the revocation involved in humour always involves a 'looking back', which is presumably another sort of attempt to find the truth which 'lies behind'. 'Humour is always a revocation (of existence into the eternal by recollection backward, of adulthood to childhood, etc.), is the backward perspective … ' (*CUP*, 602). It is true that the humorous revocation is related to childlikeness, specifically to the tendency of the child to call 'quits' and start all over again from the beginning (*CUP*, 550). However, humour itself involves the *joining* of childlikeness with understanding of the totality of suffering. This does not mean that the humorist is childish; he has control over his childlike revocation and uses it in such a way that it expresses a profundity. Unlike the child, the humorist, who sees life in terms of totality categories, recognizes the humour inherent in revoking. 'If, therefore, a fully cultured person is placed together with a child, they always jointly discover the humorous; the child says it and does not know it; the humorist knows that it was said' (*CUP*, 551). On the other hand, if a non-humorist – someone who sees existence only in terms of relativity – were placed together with the same child, he would dismiss the child's remarks as foolishness without recognizing any humour in them whatsoever.

There must always be a hidden profundity within the humorist's jest. This is what distinguishes humour from irony. For example, Socrates' response to the man who complained that people were talking about him behind his back was an ironic response. Socrates says to the man: 'Is that anything to care about? It makes so little difference what people do with me in my absence that they are even quite welcome to beat me in my absence' (as

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quoted in *CUP*, 552). This remark, Climacus argues, is ironic because it lacks sympathy and also because it says *less* than the comment that was its occasion. It says less because what it is saying is complete nonsense; it is meaningless to talk of someone beating one in one's absence. '*A humorous retort, on the other hand*', Climacus says, '*must always have something profound, although hidden in jest, and must therefore say more*' (*CUP*, 552). If the same man told a young girl that he was upset because someone was speaking ill of him, and the young girl replied along the lines of 'That's good news, because it means he's finally grown tired of talking about *me*', this retort has a ring of humour to it. However, it is not completely humorous because there is no totality category at stake (*CUP*, 553).

Up until this point, we have been looking at what Climacus sees as the relationship between revocation and humour as he has expounded it in the main text of the *Postscript*. Now it is time to turn to this issue within the context of the 'Appendix' where the revocation takes place. The clearest statement of this controversial revocation can be found on 619 and reads as follows:

> Just as in Catholic books, especially from other 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, that the book has not only an end but has a revocation to boot.

It is important here to ask what exactly the relation is between the note at the back of the Catholic book and the text that has come before it, for in this may lie a clue to the relation Climacus imagines between the text of the *Postscript* and the revocation in the Appendix. It seems to me that there are several possible reactions a reader might have to the note at the back of the Catholic book. The reader might: (1) have already been reading the text in accordance to the teachings of the Catholic Church, in which case the note changes nothing; (2) recognize the note as a mere formula statement and ignore it; (3) not be Catholic and either not understand what it means to understand the text in accordance with Catholic doctrines or not care. Therefore, the relation between text and note is not entirely clear and seems to depend upon the reader. What is clear is that what makes the book Catholic is not that it has a note at the very end. If it is a Catholic book at all, it is so because its contents are Catholic. The profundity of the *Postscript* similarly does not lie in the knowledge that it has been revoked; the profundity lies in that which Climacus is revoking. He revokes it because he feels that he honestly does not have the ability to take the final step of *explaining* it or of applying it to his own life. In other words, he is not able to become a Christian yet, and unlike many of the people around him who *think* that they have this ability and do not, Climacus knows what he does not know.

On the other hand, perhaps the most important phrase for the comparison

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between the Catholic book's note and Climacus's revocation is 'in accordance with the teaching of the holy *universal* mother Church'. Within this phrase, the word 'universal' is the key word. That is, perhaps this quotation is meant to underline the idea that the text of the *Postscript* is dealing with something universal and profound in human existence, and that this profundity is hidden by, but still present in, the revocation. The revocation is humorous because it joins the universal suffering described in the text with the particular suffering of writing a book that will most likely be misunderstood by its readers.

Before leaving the Appendix, I would like to look at one more explanation of the meaning of revocation, which is related to the point directly above concerning the joining of the universal with the particular. Climacus, since he is not looking to force his opinions on actual people, imagines a reader for his book. This imaginary reader ' … can understand that the understanding is a revocation – the understanding with him as the sole reader is indeed the revocation of the book' (*CUP*, 621). The very act of understanding the text is to revoke it, Climacus seems to be saying. But, this imaginary reader 'understands' in the sense of sympathizing totally, and to sympathize totally with the text is to revoke it, since sympathizing totally and perfectly with a humorist is to be a humorist oneself. This explanation of the nature of Climacus's revocation is related to the humorous joining of universal and particular because Climacus is talking about the universal condition of humanity in the *Postscript*, but he is imagining himself to be in conversation with only one person, an imaginary person at that. By claiming that the only reader he is addressing is a reader within his own imagination Climacus effectively 'takes back' all the explaining that he has been doing up to this point. Actual readers become like eavesdroppers who overhear a conversation that is not really meant for their hopelessly-biased ears.

This having been said, it still must be noted that the text provides very little reason to believe that Climacus would favour the annihilation of the text of the *Postscript*. First of all, Climacus actually quotes himself twice in the course of the Appendix, once from the Introduction and once from the Preface. While he does not quote anything from the main text, he makes constant allusion to it throughout the Appendix which would seem strange if he truly thought it should be thrown out. He also says – in quite strong language, it should be noted – that ' … only slovenly souls abandon what once made an absolute impression upon them, and only contemptible souls despicably exploit their own suffering by making from it a wretched profit of being able to disturb others … ' just because said 'souls' could not find any comfort in life for themselves (*CUP*, 590). Finally, while it is true that Climacus says that one should not appeal to the text of the *Postscript*, he makes this statement in language strikingly fitting for a humorist, who at the last moment decides that it is not worth it to explain the existential human

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condition. He says: 'Let no one *take the trouble to* appeal to it … let no one *bother to* appeal to it … ' (*CUP*, 619, emphasis mine).

IV

According to Climacus, 'the humorist … has comprehended suffering in such a way that he finds all documentation superfluous and expresses this by mentioning the first thing at hand', (*CUP*, 449). This idea of 'superfluous documentation' is particularly relevant to Climacus's repeated assertion that the *Postscript* is a superfluous book. To return once again to the story of the humorist's conversation with the unfortunate man (*CUP*, 449), it should be pointed out that when the humorist indicates his desire for a new bell pull as an example of suffering, he does so to express his feeling that it is meaningless to talk of such examples. By mentioning such a trivial example, when many other much more suitable examples presumably exist, the humorist expresses his belief that even the greatest example that one could give of suffering would be infinitely too small to express the totality of suffering. His attitude is something like: why strain yourself; just offer the first example that comes to mind. In this way the humorist is different from the ironist who believes that the unfortunate person's expression of pain is too much. 'The humorist is more inclined to think that it is too little, and the humorist's indirect expression of suffering is also much stronger than any direct expression' (*CUP*, 448). When the humorist incidentally stresses a particular suffering or a particular guilt, he does so ' … because the totality is thereby indirectly expressed' (*CUP*, 550).

Perhaps it is also superfluous to document suffering because suffering is a totality category; everyone experiences it without having to be told specific examples. To give an illustration, it is quite reasonable for a public service announcement in the United States to provide examples of innocent people who have been the victims of drunk drivers, because it is not a given that everyone will become such a victim, and raising awareness of this problem could (theoretically) help curb the statistics. On the other hand, if one lives in a country that is plagued by severe famine, it is superfluous to talk of specific examples of people who are starving, because starving is a part of everyone's existence in that country, and pointing out examples will not change anything.

In the context of the *Postscript*, it may seem superfluous to wonder how to become a Christian when one already lives in a 'Christian' society. Though Climacus spends a good deal of time talking about how certain *unidentified* people who think they are Christians are really far from it, he does not judge actual individuals. His criticisms are mainly aimed towards society in general or people in the abstract (*CUP*, 587). Since he starts from the assumption that each individual who says he is a Christian – and does not do anything

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to prove otherwise – should be believed (*CUP*, 587), he must assume that any given reader at least *might be* a Christian (since he has no way of knowing the actual status of any given reader),[16] which in turn would mean that the *Postscript*'s search for the way to become a Christian would be superfluous to the individual reader.

Climacus's critique of 'orthodox' Christianity's focus on the horrors of Christ's suffering is another example of how details are superfluous. In this case, documenting the individual bodily pains inflicted on Christ in the Crucifixion misses the true paradox, which is that God who is eternal took on the form of finite human being, not, as some believe, that God who is a king took on the form of a servant. It is a misunderstanding of the paradox to suggest that the suffering of innocent people in the world is somehow analogous to the suffering of Christ. The absolute paradox is absolutely distinguishable from every human situation (*CUP*, 597).

The question still remains, in what sense is Climacus's book superfluous? Actually, Climacus gives two reasons for the reader not to *say* that the book is superfluous. The first is that nobody should say that a book is superfluous who cannot explain what is being asked about (*CUP*, 618). That is, if the reader cannot do a better job in explaining how to become a Christian, he or she has no room to talk. The second reason Climacus gives to discourage others from saying that the book is superfluous is that there is no reason for anyone to 'take the trouble' to say so. If the book is truly superfluous, why bother to point out the obvious? To do so would be just as superfluous as Climacus's act of writing the book in the first place.

On the other hand, if one *has* to respond to the text at all, saying that it is superfluous is the response that Climacus prefers. It is how he himself describes the book, though, unlike the critic, he does not judge himself negatively for having written it. In fact, he says, writing superfluous books is a quite harmless and permissible pastime, which should not be of concern to any third party. It is a luxury that is tolerated by society (*CUP*, 620). What is superfluous about the *Postscript*, according to Climacus, is that it is a sequel whose purpose is to do nothing more than to put the issue of the *Fragments* into historical dress.

> But it is … frivolous of him to complete the more difficult part [the *Fragments*] and then to promise a sequel, especially the sort of sequel that any attentive reader of the first part, provided he has the requisite education, can easily write on his own – if he should find it worth the trouble … (*CUP*, 10).

It simply puts the issue of the *Fragments* into Climacus's specific historical situation, which, he argues, anyone who really understands the issue could

[16] I am referring here to the section in which Climacus says: 'The present work has made it difficult to become a Christian, so difficult that the number of Christians among the cultured in Christendom will perhaps not even be very great – *perhaps, because I cannot know something like that*' (italics mine).

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do for himself. Unlike the *Fragments*, the *Postscript* is ' … simply and solely about myself', (*CUP*, 617).

V

Although Climacus claims the *Postscript* is simply about himself, the fact that he regards himself as a humorist tells the reader that his self-expression is not simply self-assertion, but is intended to express a sympathy with all of humanity. 'The humorist's hidden pain contains a sympathy … ', (*CUP*, 551). The humorist sees suffering as something that belongs to the human race, and he feels sympathy towards the human race for its suffering, but he is not aware of his own particular suffering, and consequently does not relate himself to God.

But, if the humorist really has sympathy for the suffering of others, how can he in all good conscience revoke the explanation of suffering? Even if life seems like a hopeless riddle, doesn't the humorist 'owe' it to the human race, for whom he purportedly feels sympathy, to at least *try* to find an explanation? As a matter of fact, there are places in the text where it seems as if Climacus were merely shirking responsibility. For example, Climacus ' … feels especially happy, if worst comes to worst to be born in this speculative, theocentric century' when almost everybody fancies himself as an authority, taking the pressure off Climacus to take any leadership role. He says that:

> … to be an authority is much too burdensome an existence for a humorist, who regards it specifically as one of life's comforts that there are such great men who are able and willing to be the authority, from whom one has the benefit of accepting their opinion as a matter of course … ', (*CUP*, 619).

In the *Fragments*, Climacus is wary of promising to write a sequel because it is much too 'serious' to have to try and please people by binding oneself with such a promise (109). In the Appendix to the *Postscript*, Climacus is concerned both with not wanting to 'oblige' any reader to accept his views (620) and with not being obliged himself to serve as an authority for anyone. This sentiment is echoed in the picture of the ideal teacher–student relationship which he presents in the *Fragments*:

> Between one human being and another, this is the highest: the pupil is the occasion for the teacher to understand himself; the teacher is the occasion for the pupil to understand himself; in death the teacher leaves no claim on the pupil's soul, no more than the pupil can claim the teacher owes him something' (24).

The ideal relationship between author and reader, presented by Climacus in the *Postscript*, seems to be along the same lines: neither one should owe the other anything.

One might object that the passages in which Climacus expresses his desire not to be held responsible for his writings and simply to submit to the opinions

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of the so-called wise men of his age are intended to be ironic, and should not be taken straight. I contend that they are not ironic at all, but rather humorous. This is best illustrated by a story that Climacus tells, one which deals with the sadness of responsibility. In this story, Climacus goes to a cocktail party where a young woman, in response to some sad event that was being discussed, makes a comment about the pain of life and how nothing ever works out the way you think it should. At this point, she reaches down and pats the cheek of a young child who is standing beside her and says: 'No, a happy childhood, or rather, the happiness of a child!' (*CUP*, 551). Another person in the group, who is in sympathy with the woman, responds 'Yes, and above all the happiness of childhood to be spanked'. The group responds to this comment with laughter, but an uncomfortable laughter. This is because they take the comment as irony, which Climacus says is completely incorrect. The remark is humorous, and not ironic, because it contains sympathy. It is also humorous because it contains a profundity that is *something more* than the original comment made by the young woman. The saddest part of being an adult, according to Climacus, is the eternal recollection of guilt that comes with it.

> … and the saddest longing is quite properly expressed by the longing to be spanked …. To long for the happiness of childhood away from all the stuff and nonsense of life, from vexation of spirit and sore travail, yes, from the morose earnestness of financial difficulties, yes, even from the daily pain of an unhappy marriage, is still not nearly as sad as to long for it away from the eternal recollecting of guilt (*CUP*, 552).

Climacus's expression of the desire to escape the responsibility of being an authority is humorous in the same way that the party-goer's desire to escape the eternal recollection of guilt is.

On the other hand, the concept of authorship (and the type of 'authority' that comes with it) is treated critically by both Climacus and Kierkegaard himself. In a journal entry related to *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard writes that '… the concept of author in our day has been distorted in an extremely immoral way' (*Fragments* 224, from Papirer VII A. 158).[17] He goes on to complain that people have been conditioned to think that writers write only in order to be recognized, and asks: 'Is it not conceivable that an author would write in order that the truth he has to communicate may be understood?' (*Fragments* 224, from Papirer VII B 235). Climacus, I would suggest, writes to communicate some truth; but, humorist that he is, he recognizes that even if he were able to say the truth, people would most likely not be able to recognize it because they are so used to mediocre writers who are in the profession only to gain some sort of prestige for themselves. This situation leads Climacus to revoke the text in the end.

[17] Søren Kierkegaard *Philosophical Fragments*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 224.

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What Climacus fears most for his book is that it will be received favourably by people who do not really understand what it says. This, not the author's revocation, is the only thing that could truly lead to an annihilation of the book. Kierkegaard writes in reference to a review of *Johannes Climacus* that:

> The way an author must work is to use his time and energy strenuously concentrating upon bringing the problem to its logical conclusion, and then along comes a laudatory review and assists in making the issue and the book into the same old hash. And the author is not read, but the reviewer calls attention to himself; the review is read, and the reader must involuntarily believe the review because it is laudatory – the review which by way of praise has annihilated the book (*Fragments* 223–224 from Papirer VII A 158).

Climacus's desire to have no authority is a mechanism of self-protection. The importance of this stance is underlined in 'A first and last explanation', where Kierkegaard stresses that it is not the originality of the ideas that the pseudonymous authors put forth which makes them important, '… but precisely the opposite, in wanting, at a remove that is the distance of double-reflection, once again to read through solo, if possible in a more inward way, the original text of individual human existence-relationships, the old familiar text handed down from the fathers' (*CUP*, 630).

VI

In conclusion, in this paper I have set out to offer an interpretation of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that takes Climacus's revocation, a revocation by a humorist, seriously. It has been important to me to insist that this revocation does not, as Conant argues, mean that the rest of the text is pure nonsense. But it is just as important to me to insist that Lippitt's claim (that the revocation should be taken primarily as either an indication of Climacus's modesty or as evidence of his lack of urgency) fails to provide a sufficient description of the tone in which the revocation is made. The conclusions that I have arrived at, rather than aiming to be an easily encapsulated theory of the revocation, seek to offer a more complete, multifaceted picture of Climacus and his intentions. In my view, whatever moments of 'lack of urgency' and 'modesty' Climacus experiences, he is also a character who feels himself at the brink of being able to explain something of the utmost importance, who is aware and frustrated by his inability to 'say enough', and who laughs to keep from drowning in the sadness of responsibility and the longing for an impossible answer to human suffering.

Of the various conclusions that I have come to, the ones that seem most important are the following.

(i) The humorous jest is a type of revocation which deceives by giving the impression that it is about to explain something important, and then suddenly taking everything back at the last moment. That the humorist takes

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the explanation back at the last minute implies that: (a) that which comes *before* the revocation is not necessarily untrue as a result of being revoked, and (b) there exists the possibility of *not* revoking the explanation. This means that when Climacus revokes the *Postscript*, he is not pronouncing it as untrue. He is also not precluding the possibility that there is an answer to the question that he asks.

Lippitt also points out that jest is a type of revocation, but he fails to examine Climacus's definition of jest in detail. This results in his underappreciating the factor of impatience involved in Climacus's description of jest and falsely concluding that Climacus's revocation at the end of the *Postscript* is evidence of his 'lack of urgency'.

(ii) Documentation of suffering is superfluous not because it involves saying too much but because it involves not being able to say enough. That is, no amount of documentation can even begin to represent the totality of suffering. The *Postscript* is superfluous both because it cannot say enough to express the difficulty involved in becoming a Christian and, Climacus says humorously, because it was written in a society where everyone is already 'Christian'.

Again, Lippitt notices that the idea of superfluous documentation is important to Climacus, but he does not look carefully enough at what Climacus says making 'superfluous' comments means for a humorist. Because he does not take into consideration the passages in which Climacus explains that the superfluity comes from not being able to say *enough*, Lippitt draws a false connection between the idea that Climacus, who wrote the *Postscript* as a book solely about himself, has nothing to teach and Climacus's designation of the book as superfluous. In other words, Lippitt thinks that Climacus calls the *Postscript* superfluous because he modestly thinks that it only repeats what has already been said by others, while I argue that it is because Climacus is unable to finish his ideas. Unfinished ideas are just 'extra' information unless one has the means to complete them.

(iii) Finally, Climacus's remarks that he would rather submit to those with authority than write a book which caused people to see *him* as an authority (*CUP*, 618–619) are not ironic, but rather are humorous. His desire to escape the responsibility of being a writer with authority is humorous in the same way that a person's longing to escape eternal recollection of guilt by returning to the pain of childhood is humorous. That is, both of these examples express humorously the sadness of responsibility.

Lippitt sees Climacus's denial of authority as yet another example of his lack of urgency, his lack of concern about whether others read and understand his book or not. This point of view fails to take into account that Climacus actually does seem to be very concerned that people not *misunderstand* his book. It also fails to address the implications of social responsibility that seem to adhere to the decision to either revoke or keep on

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trying to explain how to become a Christian, the urgency of which Climacus never denies, though he does not believe himself capable of achieving it.[18]

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