

JOCHEN SCHMIDT
University of Bonn

NEITHER/NOR
THE MUTUAL NEGATION OF SØREN KIERKEGAARD'S
EARLY PSEUDONYMOUS VOICES

*So there is a repetition, after all. When does it occur?
Well, that is hard to say in any human language.*

*What kind of a wretched jargon is this human speech
called language, which is intelligible only to a clique?*

Constantine Constantius, "The Repetition"

Introduction

TRADITIONALLY, Søren Kierkegaard's early works were read in line with the title of his first extensive work, "Either/Or." In the wake of intellectual developments that have taken binary oppositions such as these in doubt, Kierkegaard's works were read as "Both/And."¹ In what follows, I will argue that Kierkegaard's work embodies a meaningful Neither/Nor. As a means to demonstrate my proposal, I will present the literary configuration of the pseudonymous writings of 1843 ("Either/Or," "The Repetition" and "Fear and Trembling") by means of an intra- and intertextual analysis of the employment of two literary motives, "gravity" and "sound," within these writings. By means of these literary motives, the pseudonymous voices engage in a "microdialogue"² underneath the propositional dialogue on the surface of their debate. This microdialogue is controversial up to the point of destructiveness in so far as the voices purposefully unhinge and suspend one another. Yet this mutual destruction of the voices is distinct from any arbitrary play of voices in so far as it yields a very *specific* 'negative illumination of faith.'³

¹ Michael Strawser, *Both/And. Reading Kierkegaard – From Irony to Edification* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997).

² See Michail M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*. Ed. and transl. C. Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 301.

³ Pap. X⁶ B 79; JP I,7; see M. Holmes Hartshorne, *Kierkegaard: Godly Deceiver. The Nature and Meaning of his Pseudonymous Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 10.

“Either/Or”

Kierkegaard’s “Either/Or,” published under the pseudonym “Victor Emerita,” displays the dispute between the aesthete (“A”) and the assessor Wilhelm. Until very recently, the assessor’s voice was assumed to present the actual “message” of “Either/Or” – although even Kierkegaard’s *own* pseudonyms suggest doubts about the validity of the assessor’s pleading. Johannes Climacus rather casually remarks:

I have read what the assessor has written on marriage in “Either/Or” and in “Stages on Life’s way,” I have read it carefully. [...] I do think that the assessor, provided I can get hold of him, if I whisper a little secret in his ear, will admit that difficulties remain. (CUP 181 [translation modified])⁴

In what follows I will try so show that the assessor’s position is destroyed by the resonance of the aesthete’s words his own pleading, yet in an ultimately constructive way. A brief sketch of the arena of “Either/Or” shall clear the way for this analysis.

“Either/Or” voices the agonizing with the crisis caused by the experience of temporality. The aesthete suffers from the fact that subsequent to any experience of fulfilment in sensual immediacy, he is ambushed by weariness and disappointment (EO II,50f.). This agony is expressed in scenes from the romantic and erotic life of the aesthete, while these have implications not only for the romantic realm, but also address the principal challenge posed to human existence by the elusiveness of time. The core experience, expressed in romantic terminology, is that “[a]s soon as a girl has devoted herself completely, the whole thing is finished.” (EO I 435) When “the whole thing is finished,” and the assessor describes the experience of the aesthete, there remains but the weariness of post-coital *tristesse*.

In that time preceding the culmination, it is not just the major, momentous encounters that interest you, but every little triviality [...]. But once the point of culmination has been reached, then, indeed, everything changes, then everything shrivels together into an impoverished and unpleasant abbreviation. (EO II,128 [translation modified])

The text “Either/Or” is entwined around the question of what consequences might follow from such an experience. At first sight, the negativistic aesthete and the affirmative assessor appear to enact opposite consequences. Yet upon

Abbreviations: CUP = *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, vol. xii/1; EO I = *Either/Or, Part I*, vol. III; EO II = *Either/Or, Part II*, vol. IV; EPW = *Early Polemical Writings*, vol. 1; FT = *Fear and Trembling*; JP = *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, trans. H. V. Hong et. al., Bloomington/London: Indiana University Press, vol. 1, p. 7 Pap. = *Søren Kierkegaard’s Papirer*, 2nd ed. by N. Thulstrup, vol. I–XVI, Copenhagen 1968–1978.

⁴ See also the ironical allusion of the pseudonym “Constantin Constantius” to the title of the first treatise of the assessor, “The Esthetic Validity of Marriage” (EO II,7ff.) in “The Repetition” (R 152).

closer inspection, the discrimination of their positions proves to be almost nonexistent, and the reader is left solely with the negative result. I will show this by explaining the aesthete's reply first and then contrasting it to the assessor's.

The aesthete's reply to the experience of the elusiveness of temporality consists in his flight from the world and from the oppressiveness of temporality. The "diary" of "Johannes the Seducer," a section of "Either/Or" which, as the pseudonymous editor of "Either/Or" implies, "appears" to be written by the aesthete (EO I,9), is the paradigmatic expression of this flight. "Johannes the Seducer," the organ of the aesthete, absconds into a pseudo-world, a world that he himself constructs, and which he then reins in a sovereign manner. He confesses to the object of his longings, "Cordelia," that it is not her whom he loves, but the world which she incites him to create (EO I,399). Consequentially, their romance instantly terminates after their first "real" night (EO I,445). The seducer stages his romance with Cordelia solely in order to join in her ability to vanish from the world by virtue of imagination. Once this has been achieved, he loses interest. This decisive ability of Cordelia, indeed of any "young girl," to escape from the world is portrayed in a very vivid picture.

[Cordelia] must not be earthbound but must float, not walk but fly, not back and forth but eternally forward [...]. She must not labor her way forward to the infinite along the irksome path of thought, for a woman is not born to labor, but she will reach it along the easy path of imagination [...] Why are men ordinarily so clumsy? When they are going to leap, they have to take a running start, make many *preparations* [...]. A young girl leaps in a different way. In mountainous country, one often comes across two towering mountain peaks. A chasmic abyss separates them, terrible to look down into. No man dares to risk this leap. But a young girl, so say the natives in the region, did dare to do it, and it is called the Maiden's Leap [...]. [F]or a young girl such a leap is only a hop, whereas a man's leap always becomes ludicrous because no matter how far he stretches out, his exertion at the same time becomes minuscule compared with the distance between the peaks and nevertheless provides a kind of yardstick. But who would be so foolish as to imagine a young girl taking a running start? One can certainly imagine her running, but this running is itself a game, an enjoyment, a display of her loveliness, whereas the idea of a running start separates what in a woman belongs together! Her leap is a floating [*svæve*]. (EO I,390ff. [translation modified]).

The "young girl," unlike the man, has the ability to make a pure departure from the world, her leap is uncontaminated by the restraints of "irksome thought," while a man is unable to shrug off reflectiveness by his own devices. Johannes the Seducer preys upon Cordelia in order to first incite (EO I,428) and then exploit her ability to do what a man cannot do by himself, i.e., to float away from the gravitational field of time into purely virtual reality. This dissolution of the self in a virtual reality is the kind of life that the aesthete opts for in response to the negative experience of temporality and

real life. His extensive pleading testifies for the vigour with which he pursues this aim. It must be clear, though, that this exodus out of temporality is not a functional reply to the challenges posed to human existence. The melancholic collection of aphorisms at the beginning of "Either/Or" ("Diapsalmata") vividly expresses the utter despair of the aesthete (EO I, 19–43). The assessor, whose diagnosis (in contrast to the therapy he recommends) is very circumspect, justly points out that the energy that drives the aesthete in his vigorous escapism is the energy of the nearness of death: "A dying person, as is known, has a supranatural energy, and so it is also with you." (EO II, 196) The question arises, then, what the assessor himself would respond to the crisis that he so aptly diagnoses.

The "solution" that the assessor proposes to the aesthete simply consists in that he urges the aesthete to balance his motion: in contrast to the aesthete's floating *from* time, the assessor pleads for a "secure floating" *in* time, i.e., for an anchoring of the self in the finite. The assessor addresses the critical experience of the elusiveness of presence described above by pleading for an existential movement which submits to surrender *and yet* has the power to "hold on." In his reply to the aesthete's essay on Eugene Scribe's "The First Love," the assessor concedes that the "first love," i.e., the experience of complete immediate fulfilment in the spring of love, may fall prey to a crisis engendered by temporality which is akin to the crisis described above. Yet having made this concession, the assessor proposes an antidote against this very ailment by recommending that one float secularly in equilibrium between surrender and holding on.

It takes the same power to surrender [the first love] as to hold on to it, and the true holding on is the power that was capable of relinquishing and now expresses itself in holding on, and only in this lies the true freedom in holding on, the true, secure floating. (EO II, 97 [translation modified].)

The aesthete, we have seen, pleads for an irreversible floating away from time. The assessor, in contrast, pleads for a secure floating *in* time. This recommended floating is meant to be suspended between two forces in equilibrium. The first force is the force of gravity, which is felt in the critical experience mentioned above. The second force counters gravity: it is released when one dumps the world in surrender to the experience of gravity. Now one wonders by what means such a marvellous equilibrium could be attained. And indeed the assessor does give a theoretical account for the possibility of this movement of secure floating *in* time, yet his pleading is shown to be rather precarious. According to the assessor, it would be "the religious" that would enable such a motion. He describes "the religious" as a "swimming belt" which can allegedly avert the consequences of a romantic shipwreck.

The religious is really the expression of the conviction that man by the help of God is lighter than the whole world, the same faith as that which is the basis for a person's being able to swim. Now if there were such a swimming belt [*Svømmebelte*] that should hold one up, it is conceivable that someone who had been in peril of his life would always wear it, but it is also conceivable that a person who had never been in peril of his life would also wear it. The latter instance is the case with the relation between the first love and the religious. The first love girds itself with the religious without having experienced any painful incident or anxious reflection beforehand, but I must beg you not to press this metaphor, as if the religious had a merely external relation to it. (EO II 58)

The assessor's urging that the aesthete is not to press his metaphor is a vain attempt to sustain an unsustainable line of thought. It is hard to believe that one could "gird oneself" with the religious as a prophylactic against the entanglements that love can bring about. Love cannot be rehearsed from a safe position, just like the swimming-movements of faith, as will be seen below, cannot be rehearsed appropriately on terra firma.⁵ If one is not willing to subject oneself to the force and the depth of love, then one is not very likely to actually experience it. If it is true that "man by the help of God is lighter than the whole world," as the assessor suggests, then indeed the religious does disengage one *from* the world, and is hardly beneficial for living *in* the world.

Furthermore, the assessor eventually admits that he is not at all immune to the kind of weariness which motivated the aesthete's floating away from time. He indicates that he is himself seized by melancholy and estrangement from his home time and again. Surprisingly, he then explains that his remedy is the *mere sight* of the *lightness* and graciousness of his wife.

[...] When I am sitting this way, desolate and lost, then I watch my wife moving *lightly* and *youthfully* around the room, always busy—she always has something to take care of—my eyes involuntarily follow her movements. [...] What it is that she is taking care of—well, I could not tell you if I tried, not if my life depended on it; it remains a riddle to me. [...] [T]he way to be occupied in the way my wife is occupied is a riddle to me. She is never tired and yet never idle; it is as if what she is doing is a game, a dance, as if a game were her occupation. [...] What she does I cannot explain, but she does it all with charm and graciousness, with an indescribable *lightness*, does it *without preliminaries* and ceremony, like a bird singing its aria. (EO II 307f. [emphases mine])

In this respect, the assessor strongly resembles the seducer, who is also "healed" by the sight of "her" enchanting youthfulness and lightness and by the elegance of her moving without preliminaries.⁶ The two pleadings stand irreconcilably opposed to one another, for the assessor offers a remedy which

⁵ See below p. 9.

⁶ The young girl, too, does not have to make "many preparations." (EO I,390ff.; see above p. 3)

is identical with the stuff that the sickness of the aesthete is made from, namely the aesthetic experience of the sight of an enchanting female. Thus, the assessor betrays that he knows no more than does the aesthete. The assessor merely rests comfortably and numbly in the bourgeois ideology of what his social class happens to consider a splendid life. The attentive reader will realise that the recommended remedy against the aesthete's lethal despair lacks impact. Death consequentially prevails in Constantine Constantius' "The Repetition." Unutterable hope, in contrast, is voiced in Johannes de Silentio's "Fear and Trembling." But this is already saying too much.

"The Repetition"

A similar interweaving of voices can be observed in "The Repetition." The conflict which is at stake here reflects the quarrel that goes on in "Either/Or": one of the two characters of this epistolary novel, "the young man," falls in love with a girl in such a way that his poetic productivity eradicates "her" reality. The pseudonymous author of the book, Constantine Constantius, gives reports of two visits to the theatre, one concerning "a young man" - who obviously is in fact his correspondent, *the* young man⁷ - and one concerning himself. "The young man" embodies an impassioned struggle against the daunting complexities of (romantic) life. He rebels against the fact that he has lost the girl whom he loves by turning her into an ideal entity. "She" is eventually poetized to such an extent that "if she died tomorrow, that would not distress him further." (R 185) Constantine embodies the inevitable downfall of any rebellion against this experience. The pseudonymous outset of the book "The Repetition" as a whole therefore affirms the inescapability of despair. This I aim to show by means of a comparative analysis of the two reports of visits to the theatre.

The report concerning the visit of the young man describes the experience of an overwhelming plurality of sounds, voices, and possibilities which depict the "self" of the young man. In the course of his comment about the young man's experience of the theatre, Constantine compares this dissociated self with the (original) roaring of a wind in a mountain region.

In a mountain region where day in and day out one hears the wind relentlessly play the same invariable theme, one may be tempted for a moment to abstract from this imperfection and delight in this metaphor of the consistency and sureness of human freedom. One perhaps does not reflect that there was a time when the wind, which for many years has had its dwelling among these mountains, came as a stranger to this area, plunged

⁷ See the evidences I list in my *Vielstimmige Rede vom Unsagbaren. Dekonstruktion, Glaube und Kierkegaards pseudonyme Literatur* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2006), p. 162, note 177.

vididly, absurdly through the canyons, sown into the mountain caves, produced now a shriek almost startling to itself, then a hollow roar from which it itself fled, then a moan, the source of which it itself did not know, then from the abyss of anxiety a sigh so deep that the wind itself grew frightened and momentarily doubted that it dared reside in this region, then a gay lyrical waltz—until, having learned the instrument, it worked all of this into the melody it renders unaltered day after day. Similarly, the individual's possibility wanders about in its own possibility, discovering now one possibility, now another. (R 155)

The individual, thus the text implies, discovers his own possibilities like a wind that hears itself. Yet instead of regimenting these possibilities as “Choragus,” instead of forming *one* theme as the wind in the mountain region eventually does, the self of the young man remains in the chaotic stage preceding the formation of a theme. He got lost in the chaos made of the uncountable possibilities of being a self, a chaos of sounds which are never united in a coherent melody, and thus die away, almost echoless.⁸ In his compulsive attempt to maintain this status, he needs to project himself against an artificial environment (R 155ff.). The status of artificiality and pretentiousness is expressed in the depiction of a robber captain, who also consists only of insubstantial *shadows* of a voice.

Among the shadows in which he discovers himself, there may be a robber captain whose voice is his voice. He must recognize himself in this reflected image. The robber's masculine form, his quick and penetrating glance, the autograph of passion in the lines of his face—all must be there. He must lie in wait in the mountain pass, he must listen for the movements of the travelers, he must blow his whistle; the robber band rushes out; his voice must *drown out* the noise [...]. If that hero of the imagination were to be set down in such a place, be furnished in all the strappings, and then be asked just to keep quiet until one had put about ten miles between them before he could surrender completely to his passionate raging—I believe he would become absolutely tongue-tired. (R 156 [emphasis mine])

Thus is the suffering of the young man: he is utterly lost in projection and artificiality. He has lost reality in a way quite similar to the aesthete. Only the movement of “repetition” could save the young man, for repetition would be the movement which appropriates the described annihilation of reality and nonetheless manages to preserve, to repeat, the love. Repetition would slay the death which befell the young man (R 137). Yet this is impossible (for the young man): repetition is a transcendent movement (R 186). Repetition is transcendental because the poet-existence of the young man would have to be shattered *and* the love of the young girl would need to be preserved in this shattering. This is impossible for the immanent realm because the love has

⁸ In his first publication, a review of Hans Christian Andersen's “Only a Fiddler,” Kierkegaard describes Andersen as someone who is characterized as a “possibility of a personality, wrapped up in such a web of arbitrary moods and moving though in elegiac duodecimo-scale of almost echoless, dying tones,” precisely because he does not bear the features of a “Choragus” (EPW 61).

been completely absorbed in the poetic existence; and one would expect that the love would be destroyed along with the shattering of the necessary poet-existence—unless love were preserved by a transcendental movement. Therefore the young man, who has no access to transcendence, stands at the boundary of repetition “*suspense gradu*,” (R 214), unable to take the next step.

The experience of the correspondent Constantine is akin to that of the young man, yet deterioration has progressed even further for him. Constantine describes his own visit to the theatre as a complete escapism, in which he surrenders himself with a greater entity. The theatre is like “the belly of the whale in which Jona sat” and the “the noise in the gallery [...] like the motion of the monster’s viscera” (R 165f.). Yet remembering this sensual experience arouses a morbid affection in Constantine, as can be seen in the following passage. In a series of associations related to this theatre visit, Constantine recalls how he would go to a place a few miles from his home town Copenhagen where a *young girl* lives.

Early in the morning, I lie in hiding in the shelter of a bush. When life begins to stir, when the sun opens its eye, when the bird shakes its wings, when the fox steals out of its cave [...], when the reaper makes his scythe ring and entertains himself with this prelude, which becomes the day’s and the task’s refrain – then the young girl also appears. Fortunate the one who can sleep! Fortunate the one who can sleep so lightly that sleep itself does not become a burden heavier than that of the day! Fortunate the one who can rise from this bed as if no one had rested there, so that the bed itself is cool and delicious and refreshing to look at, as if the sleeper had not rested upon it but only bent over it to straighten it out! Fortunate the one who can die in such a way that even one’s deathbed, the instant one’s body is removed, looks more inviting than if a solicitous mother had shaken and aired the covers so that the child might sleep more peacefully! Then the young girl appears and walks around in wonderment (who marvels most, the girl or the trees!), then she crouches and picks from the bushes, then skips *lightly* about, then stands still, lost in thought. (R 168)

Aesthetic experience incites Constantine to wish to die, which is the result of the artificiality of a life that is made of aesthetic projection like the young man’s. Therein lies the close interweaving of these two figures. Both the young man and Constantine relate to the outer world in a compulsively antithetical way: the young man, whose world is pure projection, has “the whole world in a nutshell” (R 157). The world is condensed to minimal size and thus entirely disposable for him. He is the complete master of reality. Constantine, in contrast, is in a state which he compares to the state of Jonah incorporated in the belly of the whale (R 66). He is utterly subjected to reality. The young man relates to reality as if to a stream of never-realised pure possibility; Constantine becomes completely absorbed by external reality, but is negated thus, and desires to die. While the young man embodies the furious continuation of the desperate search for a possibility to master existence, Constantine embodies the lethal surrender to the world, where the

search will be finalized. The outcome of the young man's attempt to *drown* the world in himself (see above p. 64) is eventually to *be drowned* in and consumed by the yet more powerful world. Thus, the young man will not be able to resist the apathy that Constantine radiates. His rebellious screams against Constantine eventually fail, as is expressed in a scene which recalls the death of Don Giovanni – the “role model” of the aesthete (see EO I,47ff.).

No! No! No! [...] I could despair over these written symbols, standing there alongside each other cold and like idle street-loafers, and the one “no” says no more than the next. You should see how my passion infects them. Would that I stood beside you, that I could tear myself from you with the last “no” as Don Giovanni did from the commandatore, whose hand was no colder than the good sense with which you irresistibly sweep me off my feet. (R 193)

The reader sees that the hysterical vitality of the young man must eventually collapse in lethal surrender, which Constantine – who depicts himself as a ‘ventriloquizer’ of the young man (R 228) – embodies. The young man and Constantine personify different existential aspects of the impossibility of repetition: both are incapable of repetition. The young man, the “poet,” escapes from reality into poetic imagination and productivity. Constantine, the “prose writer,” (R 218) lapses into lethal surrender, yet the young man will eventually follow him.

The very boundary at which the young man stands “*suspense gradu*” is the boundary of the “miracle.” He storms against this boundary in vain; in the end, he is wounded and sore as he regains a self that “someone else would not pick up off the street” (R 220). Nothing but the transcendent and impossible movement of repetition would have enabled him to transcend this boundary. Within “The Repetition,” there is no perspective of hope. It is only by means of the intertextual interaction with “Fear and Trembling” that “Repetition” has a part in the negative illumination of “impossible” faith.

“Fear and Trembling”

“Fear and Trembling” is at its core again a contrasting depiction of two “positions” embodied by kinds of literary figures. Contrasted are the knight of infinity/the tragic hero, who surrender infinitely, on the one hand, and Abraham, who surrenders and yet manages to hold on to his hope, on the other hand. The tragic hero surrenders in relation to himself and enters the universal; the knight of infinity, Abraham, surrenders in the face of an impossible love in relation to temporal existence by moving into infinity. Similar to the aesthete, the knight of infinity vanishes, floating away from the world. The knight of faith, in contrast, surrenders in relation to the finite *and*

yet hopes for the finite: Abraham surrenders in relation to Isaac in starting to sacrifice him, yet he is able to receive him back after this surrender and enjoy him again. This, Johannes de Silentio says, he himself could not do: he could surrender, but he would be unable to enjoy Isaac after this surrender. Johannes de Silentio sees this in the fact that Abraham is able to receive Isaac back after having surrendered in relation to him, whereas Johannes himself would have been able to surrender, though he would not have been able to rejoice in him in the movement of repetition after having resigned. Johannes de Silentio himself takes part in this working of contrasts by saying that he himself was able to surrender, as all of the figures are. Yet to surrender means to carry out merely the first part of a double movement. As regards the complete double movement, Johannes can only imitate it in a suspended mode with the aid of a swim-learning device – which recalls the words of the assessor.

In my part, I presumably can describe the movements of faith, but I cannot make them. In learning to go through the motions of swimming, one can be suspended from the ceiling in a harness and then presumably describe the movements, but one is not swimming. In the same way I can describe the movements of faith. If I am thrown out into the water, I presumably do swim, but I make different movements, the movements of infinity, whereas faith makes the opposite movements: after having made the movements of infinity, it makes the movements of finitude. Fortunate is the person who can make these movements! He does the marvelous, and I shall never weary of admiring him [...]. (FT 38)

The apparatus that is mentioned may be similar to the one depicted in the appendix of this essay.⁹ Yet the efficiency of the learning device is denied. If thrown out into the water, Johannes will not benefit from his exercises in safe-mode. The knight of faith, in contrast to Johannes, manages the double movement of surrender and retrieval of life after surrender. This double movement is utterly incomprehensible to Johannes de Silentio. He can only depict it in a metaphor, which again alludes to the metaphor of “floating,” yet in a way quite distinct from all the former voices.

He [the knight of faith, Abraham] resigned everything infinitely, and then he grasped everything again by virtue of the absurd. He is continually making the movement of infinity, but he does it with such a precision and assurance that he continually gets finitude out of it, and no one ever suspects anything else. It is supposed to be the most difficult feat for a ballet dancer to leap into the posture in such a way that he never once strains for the posture but in the very leap assumes the posture. Perhaps there is no ballet dancer who can do it – this knight does it. Most people live completely absorbed in worldly joys

⁹ In his “Diapsalmata,” Kierkegaard seems to address the same device: “At every moment I lie out in the middle of the ocean like a child who is supposed to learn to swim. [...] Admittedly, I have a rope around my waist [Sele om Livet], but I do not see the support that is supposed to hold me up.” (EO I,31f. translation modified [Hong et. al. translate “Sele om Livet” as “swimming-belt,” yet the word “Svømmebelte,” though familiar to Kierkegaard [see above p. 4], is not used *here*; Kierkegaard must be thinking of different devices.])

and sorrows; they are the benchwarmers who do not take part in the dance. The knights of infinity are ballet dancers and have elevation. They make the upward movement and come down again, and this, too, is not an unhappy diversion and is not unlovely to see. But every time they come down, they are unable to assume the posture immediately, they waver for a moment, and this wavering shows that they are aliens in the world. [...] But to be able to come down in such a way that instantaneously one seems to stand and to walk, to change the leap into life into walking, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian—only that knight can do it, and this is the one and only marvel. (FT 41)

The first group, the “benchwarmers,” who do not dance, can be compared to the bourgeois assessor. These bourgeois keep a distance from the danger of unbuffered real life experience. The knights of infinity, in contrast, leap from time into infinity, into weightlessness. In spite of differences that remain, these characters are eventually not much more than a religious version of the aesthete and the young man, who likewise leave the world, temporality and reality, unable to take the next step: to return into life. It is only the knight of infinity who manages a movement beyond. The knight of infinity is free from the enervation of gravity and still able to have his lodgings in the finite world; infinitude does not pluck him out of finitude. The young girl that the aesthete observed and the youthfully moving wife of the assessor move out of the complexity of time *without preliminaries*. The leap of the knight of faith is a negative pattern of their movement, for the knight of faith returns into time without any “wavering” and thus *without any subsequent work*. The gravity of the walk and the ephemerality of the leap are unified for him. Yet such nonconformity with the laws of gravity is only possible by means of a “supernatural” event.¹⁰ By means of the staging of this suspenseful relation between the incomprehensible knight of faith and all the conceivable – yet unsatisfying – modes of existence uttered by the other pseudonymous voices of 1843, Johannes de Silentio illumines faith negatively. Yet before pondering this communicative action in more detail, I will briefly rehearse the literary interaction of “The Repetition” and of “Fear and Trembling” in comparison.

“The Repetition” and “Fear and Trembling”

The literary strategies of “Repetition” and “Fear and Trembling” are analogous: In either text, the fictional I (Constantine/Johannes de Silentio) brings forth another figure (the young man/Abraham), in order to say something about this literary figure which does *not* apply to the fictional I: Constantine is not a poet (as opposed to the young man), Johannes does not “have” the faith, which enables repetition (as opposed to Abraham). I

¹⁰ See Simone Weil’s aphorism: “We must always expect things to happen in conformity with the laws of gravity unless there is a supernatural intervention.” Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*. Transl. E. Craufurd (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952).

illustrate this claim with two quotations:

The young man I [Constantine Constantius] have brought into being is a poet. I can do no more, for the most I can do is to *imagine* a poet and to produce him by my thought.

I myself *cannot become a poet*, and in any case my interest lies elsewhere.

(R 228 [emphasis mine])

The dialectic of [Abraham's] faith is the finest and the most extraordinary of all; it has an elevation of which

I can certainly *form a conception*, but no more than that. I can make the mighty trampoline leap [...], *but I cannot make the next movement*, for the marvellous I cannot do—I can only be amazed at it.

(FT 36 [emphasis mine])

Though the writings are structured analogously, they are heading towards opposite directions. The following sketch is meant to illustrate this point.

“The Repetition” exposes the poet-existence of the young man as an expression of the factual impossibility of repetition.

Constantine Constantius voices that feature of the young man, the nameless¹¹ poet, which he, though not being a poet himself, can conceive of: the lethal surrender as the consequence of the loss of reality – a loss that is irreversible seen from the perspective of immanence.

“Fear and trembling” exposes the faith of Abraham as an expression of the contra-factual reality of repetition.

Johannes de Silentio voices that feature of Abraham, whose faith is ineffable, which he, though not being a believer himself, can conceive of: the infinite surrender as the precondition of the repetition of reality – a repetition that is impossible seen from the perspective of immanence.

Constantine Constantius and Johannes de Silentio both hold forth a delicate and fragile literary figure to the reader: Constantine holds forth “the young man,” Johannes holds forth the “knight of faith.” Yet these delicate figures, unable to subsist, struggle and eventually tumble back to the pseudonyms. Thus, they amplify the depiction of the character of the pseudonyms, which had been holding them forth: the poet-existence of the young man tumbles out of life and thus falls back to the fictional I, Constantine. Constantine has given up on life. Any escape into the poet-existence is doomed to fail. The furious deflections of the poet eventually collapse once and for all into the continuity of Constantine *Constantius*. The faith of Abraham realises repetition, the motion that “slays the death” of surrender (see R 137). Yet Abraham tumbles out of language and back to the fictional I: Johannes de

¹¹ The young man signs as “nameless friend” (R 196.199). His pain and suffering are nameless (R 203). He is also speechless: he claims that there is no language in which he could make his case properly (R 201).

Silentio has been struck dumb. The extraordinary knight of faith, who embodies the healing of devastated reality, cannot be grasped by common language. It is only by means of coming to grips with the failure of life and only by enacting a corresponding failure of language that faith can be brought to language.

“Neither/Nor”: Constructive destruction of language

The problem which lies at the heart of the three pseudonymous writings of 1843 is the elusiveness of life respective to presence: every instant of heavenly sensual fulfilment dies down upon entering the orbit of temporality. The drag of finitude arouses the desire to be lifted up from the ground in the “dance in the vortex of the infinite” (R 222). The aesthete and the young man are driven by such a desire to escape. The assessor and Constantine amplify the impression of the aporetic character of being-in-the-world. Neither they nor the assessor are able to present an effective remedy. It is Abraham alone who is capable of finding his way back into the finite after such loss of world, while Abraham is utterly incomprehensible and ineffable. Yet the incomprehensibility of his faith does not stop the flow of discourse. Rather, it triggers a decisive and meaningful neither/nor. Neither can faith be spoken of appropriately, nor can that insight have the final word. Neither are the images of the previous pseudonyms appropriate, nor is there a way to depict faith without such imagery. Johannes de Silentio speaks of faith by negating all the voices that sound before him; he draws his power from this negation of the other voices, which describe the same conflict as he does, though from different and eventually inadequate perspectives. The image of the ballet-dancing knight of faith by itself would have little force. Yet Johannes de Silentio’s “voice,” which wordlessly silences Abraham’s faith, gains momentum by negating the unmasked, empty chatter of the assessor *and* the apparent irresistibility of the boundary at which “The Repetition” stands. Johannes de Silentio thus negates the impression that the desperate screams of the young man will be the final word. The fighting of voices and of the images they produce release a power which hurls the discourse beyond itself,¹² it is the most serious “play” of negativity one could think of. Because the dispute is never reconciled and because no higher position is dialectically achieved, the voices perpetually destroy one another. Yet by doing just that, the unsayable illumines in the mutual destruction of voices precisely as the power which has initially brought forth the controversy of the voices.

Kierkegaard’s literature is plurivocal, and yet a far cry from any indifferent “pluralism,” for the voice’s labouring is that of an excessive differentiation.

¹² See the survey over the structure of his fight of voices in my *Vielstimmige Rede vom Unsagbaren* (note 7), p. 245.

Kierkegaard does not let his pseudonyms get away with withdrawing into an allegedly cosy realm of imagery; rather, the voices each waste one another by unhinging the other's imagery. This purposeful destruction of figurative language amounts to a "constructive destruction,"¹³ which may be read as a model for a third way beyond revisionist and secular theology.

JOCHEN SCHMIDT is Graduate Assistant to the chairs of Church History and Religious Education at the University of Bonn. In 2005, he was Honorary Research Associate, Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Glasgow. He received his Ph.D. in 2005 from the University of Bonn. He recently published *Vielstimmige Rede vom Unsagbaren. Dekonstruktion, Glaube und Kierkegaards pseudonyme Literatur* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2006) [KSMS 14].

¹³ In an aphorism that opaquely refers to "Either/Or," Kafka terms the literary strategy of "Either/Or" a "constructive destruction," Franz Kafka, *Wedding Preparations in the Country and Other Posthumous Prose Writings*. With notes by Max Brod, transl. E. Kaiser / E. Wilkins (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954), p. 118.