To Revoke a Text and Keep It Too: A Curtain Call for Climacus[1]

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After a sustained delivery of over 600 *Postscript* pages, Johannes Climacus seems to have second thoughts about his effort: "[E]verything is to be understood in such a way that it is revoked" (*CUP* 619; *SV1* 7, 539).[2] What can this mean?[3] Is this last minute revocation an undoing of his creation? Could it be that just as Abraham raises his knife against his progeny, so Climacus raises a knife against *his* creation, disowning *Postscript*? What could be the motive? Why would Climacus stamp *"Not Mine!"* across his text?

To anticipate what lies ahead: if revocation turns out to be a way to defer resolution, then Climacus' wit and irony is a dance of *moral* indecision that amounts to his declining to own his own words. His sharp ability to see correctly what it takes to become a Christian stands out; and his perception that the Christian path is the one for *him* stands out *sometimes*; yet front and center is a refusal to walk that path. Climacus becomes a detached and self-indulgent humorist entertaining us and thus deferring resolution. Alternatively, revocation might turn out to be the drama of passing authority on to us, a kind of generous moral boost that Climacus offers as he leaves his stage. Disowning his authority over the meaning of his words becomes his indication that he expects us, once the play is over, to become our own adult interpreters. We're no longer to be bothered by his constant feints and parries and attempts at self-analysis (and analysis of the Christian path). However good his account of our moral-religious tasks, our challenge is to wave it and Climacus goodbye and take on those tasks as our own. Climacus makes this take-over possible by relinquishing authority.

These two interpretative possibilities give just a foretaste of several other ways to construe this otherwise enigmatic *Postscript* revocation. I consider an initial list of four intriguing but less than satisfactory interpretations, and then set out a series of fuller readings under headings that include those

we've just glimpsed, "Deferring Resolution" and "Passing on Authority." As I proceed, it will become apparent that the register of *Postscript* prose is less that of a weighty tome than of a theatrical performance.[4]

There's a moral rationale for revocation. It places responsibility for action where it belongs, on our shoulders, and ministers to a requisite cognitive humility, a disowning of pretensions to *final knowledge* or to *total understanding* in matters of living out a worthy life. A dose of cognitive humility prepares the soul for affirming things of surpassing value that exceed our understanding and yet lighten our way.

I. Four Intriguing Possibilities

1) *A bit of nonsense.* This is a familiar but overall not a very promising version of Climacus' revocation. It makes out his overall production in the *Postscript* to be something that *ought* to be revoked because the project is ill-conceived. Perhaps Climacus anticipates the Vienna Circle stance toward matters of ethics and religion: one might try to say all sorts of things in a religious or ethical vein, but in the last analysis all such talk turns out to be a kind of positivist's meaninglessness or nonsense, precisely the sort of talk one would *want* to revoke. *But is* Postscript *Nonsense?*

To take all those themes listed in the table of contents as a venture in ornate nonsense – perhaps not gibberish, but nonsense nonetheless – seems quite a drastic solution to the enigma of the revocation. Yet many writers have sensed some sort of self-defeating puzzle at the core of *the Postscript,* which might prompt Climacus himself to revoke it. In the early 60s Stanley Cavell intimated, roughly, that Climacus tries to defend subjectivity objectively – yet how can a "subjective thinker" be permitted to "think objectively," as Climacus must if he's to provide a reasonable *defense.*[5] A few years later Henry Allison argued – and here I greatly simplify – that since Climacus' arguments are so patently flawed (among other ways, along the lines that Cavell suggests), Climacus must have known that he was propounding "nonsense." Why deliver what he knows is nonsense? Well, it would be a fitting way to parody Hegel. *Postscript* then becomes a kind of all-purpose "system" that collapses on itself – to our great amusement, as we realize the joke's on Hegel.[6] Yet to my ear, these proposals miss the target, or only get a narrow slice of the story. Let me propose some alternative approaches to the enigma of revocation.

Let's assume that on this "bit of nonsense" view, we take Climacus to revoke the bulk of the text. Think of a criminal defendant wanting to

revoke a plea of innocence. In the best case, this is because he has a change of heart and wants to put his words in different order. If this scenario captures a standard sense of revocation, then we'd picture Climacus undergoing a change of heart, wanting to disavow the bulk of his *Postscript* claims. Yet Climacus has no regrets about his testimony, and doesn't think he'd be better off had he never written this massive tome. Furthermore, in revoking his initial testimony, our imaginary defendant clears the path for a more truthful account. But Climacus doesn't think his story needs revision or correction. He has no wish to reverse his tune, to set out a treatise that *denies* that truth is subjectivity, *denies* that faith is a passion, *denies* that inwardness or heartfeltness are things worth cherishing. If I'm right about this, Climacus can't be announcing a simple retraction of the substance of the text.[7] But what *is* he doing with those words that *seem* to mark a retraction?

2) *False Alarm.* Let's try a second angle on this enigmatic revocation, hearing it as a feigned revocation, a spurious retraction, a piece of irony. The revocation itself might be an ironic jest – a "just kidding" mumbled immediately after its utterance. This preserves the substance and tenor of the text. Perhaps it's a self-deprecating aside: the orator closes out a rousing address, turns from the microphones, and mumbles to no one in particular, "*What do I know! Hey! Maybe I'll take it all back!*" That stage whisper might be a reminder to himself not to take *himself* that seriously. That wouldn't mean that his oration was only foolishness or nonsense.

3) *Kick away the Ladder.* Climacus is climbing, making an ascent, which if successful, might prompt him to drop the rungs that got him there. Once a reader grasps the point of his writing, he or she can throw the book – or ladder – to one side. Wittgenstein no doubt had Kierkegaard in mind with this image. Once one gets a joke (or solves a detective mystery), one can safely set the joke or mystery aside. One goes on to other business. On balance, though, the ladder-kicking image falls short. Most jokes have a single point, and mysteries, a single solution. But *Postscript* is not a simple one-liner. It's more like a four-act comedy, farce, or tragi-comedy, something not to set aside, but that repays review, reinterpretation, and multiple re-staging. There is a sense in which we can periodically set *Postscript* aside, but it's not the sense in which we set a finished puzzle to one side.

4) *Court Jester.* Revocation, taking something back, can be part of slapstick, or cruel humor: I give you an invitation, and then, to your chagrin (and my audience's delight), I revoke it, I grab it back. April fool! Revocation might be part of an insider's joke, showing who's in and who's out.

Postscript then becomes a delightful insider's parody of Hegel, a cartoon made to elicit a laugh from philosophers. And perhaps the target is not just Hegel, but the vanity of philosophy itself (especially as it limps in one's competitors).[8] If we cast Climacus as a jester, we should picture a Shakespearean fool, uniquely wise and suited to deliver wisdom to the king, an entertainer who's deadly serious in his jests.

The jester could be mocking we kings at our secure and admired tables, thinking we have systems while all we really have is philosophical crumbs and postscripts. And the mockery might go inward, too, be self-applied and – administered. Perhaps Climacus knows he launches parodies and jests to hide his nakedness. Then it becomes a diversionary tactic for a writer unwilling to swim in the rigors of a Christian existence. We see Climacus play out the difference between seeing the truth and acting in the truth. The humorist enacts the sad and hesitant dithering of a figure who forever advances toward the brink of a decision for life and death. From this angle, the jest becomes tragi-comic, and Climacus' revocation is anything but an after-dinner joke.

II. Five Fuller Readings

1) Deferring Resolution. In the context of the book's large-scale treatment of becoming Christian, one can hear revocation as part of the gun-shy paralysis of an author in an only half-acknowledged game of hide-and-seek. Climacus is a self-described humorist who knows the requirements of a Christian life and dances away. As one critic puts it, his revocation is a "higher-order flinch in the face of the strenuousness of Christian life."[9]

Climacus understands the trials and suffering that would face him were he to embark on the tortured path of becoming a Christian. To undertake that path would mean owning up: owning up, for example, to guilt or fault – his own – and then taking corrective steps. But Climacus blinks, steps back. And to preserve a shell of self-possession, despite his terrifying indecision, he masks this faintheartedness even from himself. He's like a friend peeking in at a world he wants to enter, but dares not, and so covers over his irresolve in a ridiculous retraction of the desire.

To say the mood of *Postscript* is one of humor means that its endless string of jests, comic interludes, sentimental digressions, brilliant logical maneuvers, social criticism, satire, system-building, stage-elaboration can be taken, all of it, as a string of deferrals and delays. His true responsibility is to leave the ranks of observers, commentators, and humorists, even if he's

entertaining and brilliant in these roles. The final revocation becomes one in an endless row of self-excusing gestures. Rather than finding traction in the realities of a Christian life, Climacus keeps cavorting, an Aristophanic character laddered half way to the clouds.

2) Going After Gravitas. There's something impish, even wryly wicked, about Climacus' revocation – as if we're made victims of a *prank.* Alastair Hannay provides an image.[10] A mischievous kid rings a doorbell and dashes away.[11] Hearing the bell, we hurry to the door, but there's no one there. Readers of *Postscript* often have that feeling, a feeling of abandonment, irritation, expectations dashed. Filling out the image, we open the door, the text is there, the writer's disappeared. Climacus might want to hide, not just to annoy, but to *undo misplaced seriousness.* The irony of this disappearing act can unsettle or destabilize the claims or propositions of the text Climacus drops off by qualifying their *force* while leaving their substance intact. As a jester or a minister of irony, mimicry, or parody, Climacus can leave intact the ideas that truth is subjectivity, or that Lessing's deathbed coyness is a perfect parry of Jacobi. He can offer these ideas or thoughts straight up, while targeting the register in which we *take* these thoughts. Their proper force or register is lightness rather than *Heavy Truth or Doctrine.* Climacus deploys corrosive irony and humor against misplaced *gravitas.*

Revocation, from this angle, does not take back the central *Postscript* themes but takes back any *gravitas* that might attach to what could mistakenly be called *a Doctrine* (say about "subjectivity," or "the paradox," or "passion"). The target is *how* we hold these views – lightly or woodenly, fanatically or flexibly, as guarantees or as fragile hopes, as philosophically established or as philosophically uncertain or absurd. And *how* we hold them reflects back on *what* we think we hold. Is it *Doctrine* that we hold? Undoing misplaced seriousness, revoking it, is an aim Climacus can have in play even as he offers us a gentle invitation: "*Why not give subjectivity a try?*" Parody, irony, and jest can stem a drift toward ponderous objective *Doctrines* – or toward newly minted *Truths.* That leaves room for simple, pedestrian truths, for example that it's worth attending more closely to subjectivity.

A thought promoted as *Doctrine* or *Truth* is *imposing,* something it's natural to *enforce.* Promoting *Doctrine* or *Truth* means posing as duly important personages with *gravitas.* A humorist would laugh. Who could think that Climacus had status, authority, or gravitas sufficient to promote, impress, or enforce *Doctrine* or *Truth*! He jests his way away from these presumptions. Jest pummels deadening *gravitas,* and brings self-importance to its knees. As he's about to leave *Postscript's* stage, a revocation removes two misappre-

hensions: first, that weighty doctrine had been at issue, and second that he was the heavy delivering it.

3) *Relinquishing Authority.* In ringing the bell, dropping the text, and rushing off, Climacus revokes or gives up ownership of it. In this retraction of authority over the text, he passes authority for its preservation on to us. We're free to raise the text and make of it what we will. Climacus is not a privileged interpreter. He releases claims to possess sole rights – *any rights* – to its meaning. This reading exactly fits the immediate context of Climacus' announcement. It's time to hone in on the key passage more intently, to give it honor due.

The paragraph that ends with his retraction begins with Climacus making an observation about finishing a text with an appeal to authority. He notes that some texts finish with the notice that everything said therein accords, let us say, with the authority of "the holy universal mother Church" (*CUP* 619; *SV1* 7, 539). Humorously, impishly, he'll turn this convention inside out. Climacus not only abstains from seeking authority of any church or figure outside the text; he disowns his own authority as author. As the book plays out its last sentences, what gets revoked is the reputed authority of the author town the meaning of his words. Climacus *abdicates* authority. He refuses to stand to *his* written work in the relation that "the holy universal mother church" stands to *her* written works.

Among the several characters on *Postscript's* stage (the subjective thinker, the scholar, Deer Park strollers), we can hardly miss the impresario. If Climacus can abdicate control of the meaning of his performance, he must have *had* the authority that he now relinquishes. To enter the book in the proper spirit is to grant Climacus a license to set out in a preliminary fashion the meaning of his speech and performance. By the time we're done, however, the speech and performance will have taken on a life of its own, and the license will expire, and perhaps we need reminding of this. At first Climacus is the weight behind the words; then he rightfully disappears as his departure as ever-present arbiter. As midwife, he ministers and assists but the lion's share of labor will be ours as we work through *Postscript's* dialectical thickets.

Consider an analogy. Climacus is on stage through the bulk of *Postscript.* As the curtain falls, the meaning of that performance transfers in our direction. At his curtain call, we thank him with applause – he's held us through 600 pages. Ever a self-commentator, Climacus (somewhat redundantly) reminds us that he's about to disappear. He's revoking his role as impresario. At the end of *Hamlet,* Richard Burton takes a bow and relinquishes the

meaning of the play to us. As the curtain falls, he abandons "Hamlet" to us. His license to be "Hamlet" is revoked until the next performance. As the curtain falls, Climacus reappears to remind us that his stint is done. He passes on to us authority to interpret *Postscript*.

Plato has Socrates retreat in ignorance, leaving questions in our lap. Our Socratic Climacus abdicates the limelight and reminds his readers that what's happened is not didactic or doctrinaire or an "objective truth" to shout from rooftops. If I allow Climacus to abdicate or relinquish his authority, I allow him to plead a kind of Socratic ignorance about what to do with his performance. Through his abdication, he prevents me from citing him as an expert. I can't tout the authority of an author who revokes his own authority. Climacus is as ignorant as I, a point he conveys by claiming he is no better placed to fully understand the role just performed than any other spectator. The rough patches, in life or in the text, are *our* rough patches now. In Kant, reason releases me into my majority – I'm no longer dependent on another. [12] In relinquishing authority, Climacus releases me into my ethical maturity. I'm released to assume my subjectivity. Passing the baton of interpretative freedom and authority to us can be linked to a recognition of cognitive limitations, to a coordinate *humility*.

4) Renouncing Final Understanding. As Kant would have it, to pursue unlimited knowledge or understanding through the ministrations of unlimited reason is to chase a chimera, to defy metaphysical limits on our powers. Kierkegaard would agree, and add that to understand faith (or subjectivity) is to revoke the exorbitant claim that faith (or subjectivity) is something one fully grasps (through the ministrations of reason or understanding).[13] Kant saw cognitive humility as following from our lack of access to the thing-in-itself; Kierkegaard would agree, and adds an existential twist: if you think you've understood things of utmost importance – *now I understand; thank God, I can shelve the matter; I completely 'get it'; what more is there to understand or grasp?* – then think again; you clearly *haven't* understood. In understand existential matters – death, love, or happiness, for instance – understanding will always be unfinished, part of your becoming, and so an endless task. Understand that understanding will never be complete – that chimera of complacent *finished understanding* must be revoked.

This fits in with Alastair Hannay's suggestion that *Postscript* continues Kierkegaard's early venture in recasting Faust, a figure in pursuit of boundless knowledge and understanding. If so, then in Kierkegaard's retelling, Faust gains his soul by *selling out* his hope for boundless understanding.[14] To gain a soul is not to take another step toward knowledge. It's to be over-

taken by something elusive of surpassing value.[15] A condition of true understanding then becomes accepting things that will defy it.[16] Kant saw that we don't fully grasp, cannot fully represent, the presence of the ubiquitous "I think" or the pull of ever-present regulative ideals. Yet life depends on yielding to their inescapable, opaque powers. We honor the pull of Freedom or Totality even as these surpass reason's grasp. Our will is informed by what the mind fails to fully grasp.

Let's restate the gist of these interpretations of *Postscript's* retraction. (There's one more to come.) Revocation turns out to be:

1. a symptom of irresolution: "*Everything must be understood in such a way that it is revoked.*" To revoke is to *step back from decision.*
2. a way to defeat self-important *gravitas*: "*Everything must be understood in such a way that it – that is, its tendency toward grave Doctrine – is revoked.*" To revoke is to *step back from heavy doctrine.*
3. an abdication of authority: *"Everything is understood in such a way that it – that is, my authority in saying it – is revoked."* To revoke is to *step back from authority.*
4. an existential version of Kantian cognitive humility: *"Everything must be understood in such a way that it – that is, my anticipation of final understanding – is revoked."* To revoke is to *refuse a Faustian drive for total understanding.*

These are not exclusive interpretative options. Revocation is a theme thick enough to carry all four weights, and the fifth, set out below. The weight of each interpretative strand can be independently articulated and assessed even as it interweaves in the rich ensemble of meanings evoked in any living instance of a revocation, whether in a text or in a moral or religious life.

5) A Door to Special Goods. Humility in understanding or knowledge is a good thing on its own, but also because taking arrogance down a notch opens possibilities not otherwise available. Revocation then becomes morally enabling, ceding access to goods denied us so long as we presume to fully know or understand them.[17] The Faustian aim of boundless knowledge-acquisition is not only futile; in the deepest sense, it's an assault on life. Kant thought that ceasing to push forward with reason's will-to-mastery would allow something of surpassing yet elusive value to enter inwardly. In his case, faith would enter, but also what he called regulative ideas – Freedom or Totality, say. Socratic ignorance is akin to this Kantian restraint on the forward push of knowledge, restraint in the interest of letting something other in.

Sometimes we push failingly on a door that's waiting to swing inward. We do not grasp things of wonder, awe, or mystery, for they grasp us, defying full understanding. We avidly embrace those things that captivate us, that capture us – a love of seascapes, math, or the tour de France; a love of God or mirth, of Schubert or of children. To acknowledge understanding's limits makes room for loves and dedications aimed toward things that can continue to replenish, that are not attained through striving to understand, and that will remain forever longingly beyond our grasp. Remember: it's as much the love of math as the math that eludes us. George Pattison puts this eloquently in terms of knowledge, rather than understanding: "Beyond the question of knowledge are poetry, madness, and love – but if these are not and cannot be knowledge, they may yet be best of all."[18]

Revocation, then, in this last formulation, turns out to be:

5. a Socratic clearing of a rubble blocking us from things of utmost worth. *Everything must be understood in such a way that it – that is, my refusal to acknowledge what surpasses understanding – is revoked.* To revoke is *to open toward goods otherwise denied.*

Final Thoughts. Socratic ignorance frees interlocutors to find their way without their mentor imposing or enforcing an authoritative Doctrine or explicit Truth. It also models openness to a good he makes no claim to master, to a good he can't capture and serve up in propositions we could band behind in the parade of knowledge. Redemptive or saving knowledge is self-knowledge, delivered not in parades, but one by one, and displayed in how this man lives, not in the persuasiveness of his detached reason's attempted proofs. Take the convictions that an unexamined life is not worth living, or that philosophy begins in wonder, or that it is better to suffer than to do harm. These are truths, convictions, modeled in his living and his dying. He lives in these truths; they are not set out as independent doctrines to be backed by argument alone. Holding fast to these convictions might seem more like faith than obedience to a guarded reason's counsel.[19] In all these respects, Kierkegaard finds truth in a Socratic way.

The work of understanding is given its due time. Then *Postscript,* like Climacus, becomes a self-canceling presence. Its revocation nudges us to set words aside in favor of quite other things to seek and suffer and abide. Faust stalks knowledge everywhere and always. To turn one's back on this obsession is to be released toward living with and for love or beauty, poetry or adventure, justice or friendship or the divine, even as these outflank a drive for final comprehension.

Notes

1. A version of this essay was read at the Meetings of the American Philosophical Association, December 29, 2005. I thank Brian Soderquist for his patience with my revisions.
2. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* vol. 1, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1992.
3. The shock of this announcement might be the shock of discovering that a mad computer virus had been implanted in the closing pages, a virus that now threatens to undo the entire book, making a mockery of our effort to absorb it.
4. I trace out a theatrical framework in "*Postscript Ethics: Putting Personality on Stage,*" in *Confronting Kierkegaard: Ethics, Love, and Faith,* Bloomington, Indiana University Press, forthcoming.
5. Cavell's "Existential and Analytical Philosophy" first appeared in *Daedalus*, Summer, 1964; it is reprinted in his *Themes Out of School,* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984. Here he says, roughly, that Kierkegaard becomes comically, and self-defeatingly objective in his defense of subjectivity.
6. Henry Allison, "Christianity and Nonsense," in *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 20, 1967. Jim Conant revives variants of this broad approach in a number of essays in the 90s. James Conant, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense," in *Pursuits of Reason*, eds., Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam, Lubbock, Texas Technical University Press, 1993.
7. The point might be finer: Climacus will retract his text not in favor of an improved version but to withdraw it from contention altogether. He declines to endorse subjectivity *or* objectivity, passion *or* indifference. After all, the Vienna Circle version did not say that religious statements were false (and should be corrected); they were neither true nor false, just nonsense. Our defendant revokes his confession, but means also to revoke any claim to innocence, mocking both alternatives equally. But *Postscript* is not *nihilistic* in this way. From all the evidence, Kierkegaard put Climacus to work writing what he took to be his last and greatest work, and took that task quite seriously.
8. See the extended treatment of these issues in John Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, Basingstoke, MacMillan, 2000. Allison suggests this, and Richard Bernstein (among others) spells out the Hegel parody.
9. This apt characterization was conveyed in email correspondence with Steve Webb. He continues, "Since the Christianity [Climacus] outlines is full of burdens and trials which he personally is incapable of taking on, should we be totally surprised to find him shrugging it all off in one last great jest– as if this huge, highly opinionated book on the hardships of Christianity could not possibly be of interest to anyone except himself and his imaginary ideal reader?"
10. See Hannay's discussion of *From the Papers of One Still Living*, which has a revocation in a postscript to its preface. Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 104.
11. See Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, p. 104. See also p. 313.
12. This freedom is, of course, Kant's definition of Enlightenment. Neither Kierkegaard nor earlier Romantics turn their back on this central Enlightenment aspiration. How much hope we should place on an unrelenting search for knowledge or understanding is another matter, one on which Kierkegaard will part company with some early Enlightenment defenders.
13. The broad brush I've adopted here means that I set aside the important contrast, from Kant's point

of view, of reason and understanding. I don't think my present neglect of that contrast weakens the analogy I draw.

14. See Hannay, *Kierkegaard,* pp. 117-118, p. 311.
15. See note 12.
16. Here we run up against what Climacus will call "the paradox." Wittgenstein often wrote in this vein, no doubt having Kierkegaard in mind. In one instance, he warns a friend that the most important part of the *Tractatus* is what lies outside it, beyond its understanding. It's sometimes argued insiders reach understanding and only outsiders are set on an always unfinished restless search. Only outsiders, like Climacus, it's said, are forced to see faith as absurd, or a paradox, and beyond understanding. But even if one were to "arrive" at faith (and it's doubtful that one ever does), one is not then granted permission to set aside the struggle to understand. Faith is not a retreat to complacency, but tied essentially to struggle and cognitive uncertainty. De Silentio's knight of faith must *continually* make his dance-like double movement. It looks like he has sufficient understanding for the dance to go on, but not enough to "rest content" in his understanding of it.
17. Revocation gives us freedom to interpret in the service of expanding understanding. But that freed up understanding cannot move outward limitlessly. It collides with metaphysical barriers. This collision enacts a kind of higher-level revocation, this time in the service of surpassing yet elusive values.
18. George Pattison, *A Short Course in the Philosophy of Religion*, London, SCM Press, 2001, p. 142.
19. Jonathan Lear argues that Socrates needed to make space for instituting a new concept, the idea that one has a "life-as-a-whole" that needs assessment, examination. Standing back to evaluate a life is novel and unknown – a crime – in a culture whose practice would be to evaluate only an action or a policy. His questions didn't exactly make sense to his audience, and his professed ignorance was, in part, an acknowledgment that *he* could not deliver answers. Kierkegaard, too, is raising questions that his audience can neither answer nor abide. See *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 102.