"The Laughter of Despair": Irony, Humor, and Laughter in Kierkegaard and Carlyle

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Instead of sorrow, you choose a joy that is sorrow’s changeling. This joy you have now chosen, the laughter of despair.

—Kierkegaard’s Judge William

I

To compare two authors as seemingly different as Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) may strike some as a curious undertaking. As several scholars warn, both thinkers are strongly resistant to comparisons of any kind. To be sure, Carlyle is often compared with Goethe and those German Romantics (most notably Jean Paul Richter) who “influenced” him, and with those English Victorian authors whom he “influenced.” And Kierkegaard is often linked to those German speculative philosophers (especially Hegel) by whom he was “influenced” and against whom he “reacted,” and with those later philosophers (e.g., Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, and Jean-Paul Sartre) and theologians (e.g., Karl Barth and Paul Tillich) who were “influenced” by him. However, only several comparisons of
considerable length have been made of Carlyle and Kierkegaard, and none focuses, as I will, on their attitudes toward irony, humor, and laughter.

There are obvious reasons for this oversight. Although they were contemporaries, neither of these two men knew the other’s work, and hence neither one affected the other. Carlyle tends to be viewed as a historian and essayist, or “man of letters,” whereas Kierkegaard is generally thought of as a philosopher and theologian. The parallels drawn between Kierkegaard and Carlyle concern almost exclusively the more serious, nonhumorous and nonironic aspects of their thought. While likening Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* (1833–1834) to what he calls the “fictions humoristiques” of Kierkegaard, one French scholar finds the two men sharing an antipathy toward pretentiousness among the clergy and certain customs of the established church. Other scholars remark on the two men’s similar senses of dread, angst, despair, loneliness, and scorn for the “faint of heart.” (Significantly, both men are known to have contemplated suicide—Carlyle until 1823, Kierkegaard around 1836.)

While all these analogies are legitimate, a more striking similarity emerges from the fact that the theme of suffering that assumes such prominent roles in the thinking, writing, and lives of Kierkegaard and Carlyle, is counterbalanced by their shared preoccupation with the concepts of irony, humor, and laughter. This correspondence may help to illuminate both men’s debt to the critical theory of the German Romantics, who in seeking to develop a dignified rationale for the comic, tended to view humor in “serious” terms as a gauge of the finite against the infinite, and irony as a sequence of contrasts between the ideal and the real, a means by which the “transcendental ego” could mock its own convictions and productions. Though unaware of one another, Kierkegaard and Carlyle share in their distinctive blendings of irony, humor, and laughter with a melancholic tone, and, most importantly, in their innovative appropriation of those concepts as morally, ethically, and (with Kierkegaard) religiously significant categories.

**II**

During his lifetime Carlyle was known for both his melancholy and his unusual laugh. Certain causes behind his peculiar blend of mirthful and doleful tendencies are not difficult to determine. On the one hand, his parents, each of whom by his account were characterized by “wit” and “humour,” clearly influenced the formation of his humor.
There were also certain individuals and acquaintances whose sense of humour he came to value, such as Sir David Wilkie, Charles Dickens, Jane Welsh Carlyle, Edward Strachey, and George Bancroft. On the other hand, Carlyle's lifelong melancholy can be explained in part by the harsh moralism of the Burgher Seceders, the sect to which his family belonged while he was a child. As an outgrowth of Calvinism, the Burghers' creed emphasized both a transcendent God who scorns human depravity, and the notion that each human is predestined to be saved or damned. This gloomy moralistic consciousness, together with a preoccupation with whether one has been chosen to be saved or not, leads to the sort of "moral strenuousness" that characterizes Carlyle. By his own account, his gloominess was intensified by his suffering from dyspepsia, which plagued him from 1818 until his death, and which he feared might threaten his own humor. Noteworthily, this same ailment afflicts the melancholy protagonist of Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh. As disclosed in a letter written the year *Sartor* appeared, Carlyle had all but reconciled himself to the fact that his illness and melancholy had drained much of his innate humor: "I have under all my gloom a genuine feeling of the ludicrous; and could have been the merriest of men, had I not been the sickest & saddest."  

Carlyle's gloom, however, never dampened his appreciation for humor in others, and he could be merciless toward people whose sense of humor did not conform to his notion of what humor should be. For example, in response to W. H. Wylie's stated admiration for Charles Lamb's humor, Carlyle retorts in a letter that Lamb had "only a thin streak of Cockney wit." Carlyle claims to know "Scores of Scotch moorland farmers, who for humour could have blown Lamb into the zenith." If man is the measure of all things for some, humor becomes the measure of all persons for Carlyle. Out of his critical appraisal of humor develops his conviction that humor "is the surest sign (as is often said) of a character naturally great." Viewing humor as "a test of genius," he habitually evaluates other writers and historical figures against this standard in book reviews and biographical essays. His elevation of the "humour" of the moorland farmers above Lamb's "wit" is consistent with the evaluative gradation of "humour," "irony," "ridicule," and "wit" that emerges in his more serious essays on Richter and Voltaire.  

In his first essay on "Jean Paul Friedrich Richter" (1827) Carlyle discusses the characteristics of "true humour," which he discerns in the writings of that great German Romantic stylist. For Carlyle, "the essence
of humour is sensibility,” but he cautions that “unless seasoned and purified by humour, sensibility is apt to run wild; will readily corrupt into disease, falsehood, or, in one word, sensibility. Witness Rousseau, Zimmerman, ... St. Pierre.” Citing Schiller’s notion of “sport” as “the last perfection of our faculties,” he refines his definition: “True humour is sensibility, in the most catholic and deepest sense; but it is this sport of sensibility; wholesome and perfect.”22 Carlyle says of Jean Paul, whom he esteems as the greatest of all humorists: “A Titan in his sport as in his earnestness, he oversteps all bounds, and rides without law or measure.” Yet he stresses that “the anarchy is not without its purpose. . . . Richter is a man of mirth, but he seldom or never condescends to be a merry andrew.”23 Jean Paul’s sportive “anarchy” is in constant tension with and counterbalanced by the temperance of “purpose”: “Wayward as he seems, he works not without forethought: like Rubens, by a single stroke, he can change a laughing face into a sad one. But in his smile itself a touching pathos may be hidden, a pity too deep for tears.”24

Here Carlyle speaks quite literally. For in distinguishing the “true humour” of Jean Paul from irony, which he deems inferior to humor, Carlyle suggests that the effect of such humor is not laughter. Irony “often passes by the name of humour, but consists chiefly in a certain superficial distortion or reversal of objects, and ends at best in laughter,” whereas Jean Paul’s true humor “springs not more from the head than from the heart; it is not contempt, its essence is love; it issues not in laughter, but in still smiles, which lie far deeper.25 This denial that true humor is identifiable with laughter—a denial which Carlyle was neither the first nor the last to make26—has several moral implications that are developed more fully in Carlyle’s essay “Voltaire” (1829). The opposite of Jean Paul, Voltaire is not a “great character,” in Carlyle’s opinion, because of his “inborn levity of nature, his entire want of Earnestness. Voltaire was by birth a Mocker, a light Pococurante; which natural disposition his way of life confirmed into a predominant, indeed all-pervading habit.” In this sense his “disposition” resembles irony, which is “often more a habit than an endowment.” Because habit, unlike true humor, lacks sensibility and discretion, the mocker is indiscriminate about what or whom he laughs at, and Carlyle objects to this proclivity: “There are things in this world to be laughed at, as well as things to be admired; his is not a complete mind, that cannot give each sort its due. [Being] a small faculty, the smallest of all, [ridicule] is directly opposed to Thought, to Knowledge, properly so called; its nourishment and essence is Denial, which hovers near the surface, while Knowledge dwells far below. Moreover, it is by nature selfish and morally trivial, it
cherishes nothing but our Vanity." Voltaire's wit thus ranks "essentially among the lowest species even of ridicule," since it "cannot maintain a demure sedateness."

As seen above, Carlyle conceives of humor, irony, and ridicule as three levels in a kind of moral hierarchy, with humor at the top, ridicule at the bottom, and irony in the middle. While he eulogizes Jean Paul's humor, however, and condemns Voltaire's irony and ridicule, it would be wrong to assume that Carlyle regards himself as a humorist. Indeed, for the most revealing testimony to his inescapable role as ironist, one need look no further than Sartor, which appeared four years after the Voltaire essay.

Consistent with one of the definitive conventions of Romantic irony, Carlyle as author can be seen at work, from the opening chapter of Sartor, playfully deceiving and teasing his readers. As the book's ostensible "Editor" he tells of a distinguished German professor, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh (Devil's Dung), who dwells in the town of Weissnichtwo (Know-not-where). This Editor purports to arrange and interpret for his Victorian British public an assortment of Teufelsdröckh's philosophical and autobiographical fragments, which he has received in six paper bags from the latter's friend, Hofrath Heuschrecke. From these bits and pieces, together with his own recollections from personal encounters with Teufelsdröckh, he undertakes three tasks, which encompass Sartor's triadic structure: the introduction of Teufelsdröckh and definition of the subject of "clothes" (bk. 1); the reconstruction of Teufelsdröckh's autobiography (bk. 2); and the interpretation of Teufelsdröckh's "clothes philosophy" (bk. 3).

All the while, from behind his editorial mask, Carlyle's aim is to present his own philosophy (the "philosophy of clothes"), which represents a fusion of German transcendentalism and his own Calvinist ethic, tailored to meet the specific needs of his age. Anticipating the British public's prejudices towards and misunderstandings of German transcendentalism and German thought and culture in general, he teases his empirical-minded readers by having the Editor assert in his opening line that the book is intended for "the reflective mind." Teufelsdröckh, described as the professor of "high, silent, meditative Transcendentalism," swigging from his "huge tumbler of Gukquk [beer]" (p. 15), embodies what would have been the stereotype of the German academic for Carlyle's British readers.

The Editor's voice is meant to come across as that of a native Englishman, who, in trying to construe the philosophy and life of the exotic Teufelsdröckh, shares the same confusion that he knows must be
felt by Sartor’s typical British reader. Yet the Editor is not as much the reader’s ally as he pretends to be. Though he tries to stifle Teufelsdröckh’s mysterious irony, and declares himself “insignificant,” while urging readers “to study and enjoy, in simplicity of heart, what is here presented” (p. 13), readers of the original installments of Sartor that appeared in Fraser’s Magazine became angry upon realizing that Teufelsdröckh, the clothes volume, and all the rest, in fact, were an utter farce.

Paradoxically, Carlyle’s distaste for irony is discernible even where his style in Sartor is at its most ironic. The fundamental tension between his moralistic disapproval of irony and his artistic use of it figures determinantly in his presentation of Teufelsdröckh. Notwithstanding attempts by scholars to locate the source of Teufelsdröckh’s character in Jean Paul and E. T. A. Hoffmann, and in different aspects of Carlyle’s own personality, Teufelsdröckh symbolizes, among other things, his creator’s frustration over his own uncontrollable propensity toward ironic expression. To support this claim, the information that Sartor provides about Teufelsdröckh’s irony should be taken into account.

The Editor acknowledges early on the difficulty he and Heuschrecke have faced in trying to pin down “biographical data” about the “parentage, birthplace, prospects, or pursuits” of their “enigmatic” professorial hero, who “was a man so still and altogether unparticipating, that to question him even afar off on such particulars was a thing of more than usual delicacy” (p. 17). However, when the Editor warns that Teufelsdröckh “in his sly way,...had ever some quaint turn, not without its satirical edge, wherewith to divert such intrusions, and to divert you” (p. 17), the same might also be said about Carlyle himself in his role as dissembling author vis-à-vis his public. Certain features of the unforgettable account of the single occasion on which Teufelsdröckh ever laughed (see pp. 32–34) parallel the reported facts about Carlyle’s own laugh. Significantly, the Editor’s recollection of the laugh immediately follows his description of Teufelsdröckh’s “malign coolness,” his “half wrinkle of a bitter sardonic humour,” which one would expect to find “on some Mephistopheles”: Teufelsdröckh’s “look ... is probably the gravest ever seen,” suggesting “the gravity of some silent, high encircled mountain pool, perhaps the crater of an extinct volcano, into whose black deeps you fear to gaze” (p. 32).

The juxtaposition of this portrait with the account of Teufelsdröckh’s sudden burst of laughter clearly reflects the contrast between Carlyle’s own persistent gloom and his incredible laugh. That Jean Paul and his “World-Mahlstrom [sic] of Humour” are what ignite Teufelsdröckh’s explosive laugh makes for an ironic contrast with

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Carlyle’s comments in his essay on Jean Paul, whose humor he found issuing itself “not in laughter, but in still smiles.” The professor’s laugh, a putative caricature of Carlyle’s own, seems an ethical impropriety. This is suggested by the reaction of the Editor, “who laughed indeed, yet in measure, [and] began to fear all was not right,” and by Teufelsdröckh’s own “slight look of shame” (p. 33) after he regains his composure. Nonetheless, the Editor esteems Teufelsdröckh’s laugh as “the cipher key, wherewith we decipher the whole man” (p. 33). And just as Teufelsdröckh’s Romantic excessiveness appears summed up in his remarkable cachinnation, so the unremarkable life of his timid flunky, Heuschrecke, seems captured in the earlier description of the latter’s own meek little laugh (p. 26).

An interesting shift occurs in the references to Teufelsdröckh’s humor as *Sartor* proceeds. We are told, “Our Professor, whether he have humour himself or not, manifests a certain feeling for the Ludicrous, a sly observance of it, which, could emotion of any kind be confidently predicated of so still a man, we might call real love” (p. 49). This recalls Carlyle’s claim in his Richter essay that love is the essence of Jean Paul’s humor. But after piecing together Teufelsdröckh’s autobiography and presenting his philosophical writings, *Sartor*’s Editor warns that “the Professor’s keen philosophic perspicacity is somewhat marred by some perverse, ineffectual, ironic tendency” (p. 274). Having quoted one particularly rambling passage, the exasperated Editor declares, “His irony has overshot itself; we see through it, and perhaps through him” (p. 287).

The Editor’s exasperation with Teufelsdröckh’s persistent irony betrays Carlyle’s negative attitude toward his own ironic impulse, which the professor personifies. In one passage Teufelsdröckh reflects upon his own irony and condemns his abuse of irony and sarcasm as a youth, concluding, “Sarcasm I now see to be, in general, the language of the Devil; for which reason I have long since as good as renounced it” (p. 129). Still, Teufelsdröckh, like his creator, continues to employ irony. But while Teufelsdröckh lives under the illusion that he has “renounced” the irony of his youth, Carlyle is well aware that he himself has retained his own. Though his condemnation of irony in the Richter essay may be seen as “part of a larger campaign throughout the essays to purge Carlyle’s own aggression against the world and his denunciation of it,”37 he evidently realized that he could not rid himself of his tendency to ironic expression. Soon after *Sartor* first appeared, John Stuart Mill asked Carlyle, in a letter, whether the book’s “mode of writing between sarcasm or irony and earnest, be really deserving of so much
honour as you give to it by making use of it so frequently." In response, Carlyle admits the accuracy of Mill's observation and confesses that his use of irony is beyond his own control:

Irony is a sharp instrument; but ill to handle without cutting *yourself*. I cannot justify, yet can too well explain what sets me so often on it of late: it is my singularly anomalous position in the world,—and, if you will, my own singularly unreasonable temper.

Like Carlyle, Kierkegaard found himself playing a uniquely "anomalous" role in relation to his society—that is, as a solitary exponent of true Christianity within the "pagan" reality of modern Christendom. For this reason, among others, his famed melancholic inclination was offset by a preoccupation no less intense than Carlyle's with the concepts—and uses—of irony, humor, and laughter.

III

Kierkegaard's proneness to depression is given ample recognition by the very titles of H. V. Martin's *Kierkegaard the Melancholy Dane* (1950), M. Grimoult's *La Melancholie de Kierkegaard* (1965), and W. H. Auden's essay "A Knight of Doleful Countenance" (1968). Still, Walter Lowrie could insist that Kierkegaard "was always humorous, often whimsical, . . . in strangest contrast to the grimness of his life and the sternness of his purpose." As another biographer puts it, Kierkegaard "was clinical about melancholy," and that approach allowed him a "happy, full acceptance" of his emotional state. Only by objectifying his melancholy—as does *Either/Or* 's "A" when he characterizes his depression as "the most faithful mistress I have known"—could Kierkegaard have concealed it from others as skillfully as he did throughout his life.

As in Carlyle's case, parental influence and religious upbringing help account for Kierkegaard's melancholy. A dominating father consumed by a profound gloom and sense of guilt instilled those same emotions in Søren. Kierkegaard would recall that his strict pietist rearing by his father intensified his own melancholy and implanted in him a "dread of Christianity." At the same time, however, biographers are at a loss to account for Kierkegaard's pronounced sense of the comical—though his mother has been identified as a possible source. In any case, the mixings of melancholy and humor in Carlyle and Kierkegaard are strikingly similar. And the parallel between the Carlyle's
ironic use of the Editor and Teufelsdröckh in Sartor to mask himself from the public, and Kierkegaard’s use of pseudonyms, cannot be overlooked.

The paradoxical tendency of Kierkegaard’s melancholy to give rise to comical insight can be illumined by Johannes Climacus’s axiom that “The comical is present in every stage of life..., for wherever there is life, there is contradiction, and wherever there is contradiction, the comical is present.” In a journal entry of 1841, Kierkegaard observes that “the imperfection of everything human is that its aspirations are achieved only by way of their opposites,” and hence “the melancholy have the best sense of the comic.” He develops this notion in Stages on Life’s Way (1845) through the narrator of “Quidam’s Diary” in “Guilty?/Not Guilty?,” who asserts: “The more one suffers, the more sense, I believe, one gains for the comic. Only by the most profound suffering does one gain real competence in the comic.” Frater Taciturnus, whose commentary on “Quidam’s Diary” constitutes the second part of “Guilty?/Not Guilty?” observes that “the esthetic quite consistently treats all self-torment comically.” But this is not to deny the aesthete’s awareness of the paradoxical link between suffering and the comic. For example, in the Diapsalmata of Either/Or, “A” ponders the question: “What if everything in the world were a misunderstanding; what if laughter really were weeping!” In “The Tragic in Ancient Drama,” he concludes that “the individual is not happy until he has the tragic.”

Countless other paradoxes concerning the relation of the comic to the tragic crop up in Kierkegaard’s œuvre, and he frequently remarks that one does not know whether to laugh or weep at them. For him the idea of the comical comes hand in hand with the notions of suffering and the tragic, since—in Climacus’s words—“The tragic and the comic are one and the same, in so far as both are based on contradiction; but the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comical, the painless contradiction.” Kierkegaard’s acceptance of this conjunction distinguishes him from Carlyle. Teufelsdröckh seems comical, from a Kierkegaardian perspective, when he becomes convinced of a solution to the contradiction between the finitude of human existence and the infinite. Having passed through the “darkness and despair” of the Byronic “Everlasting No” (Sartor, ch. 7), and “The Centre of Indifference” (ch. 8), he undergoes a spiritual conversion to “The Everlasting Yea” (ch. 9), wherein “all contradiction is solved; wherein whoso walks and works, it is well with him” (p. 192). Dismissing happiness as a vain whim, he ultimately advocates the Goethean creed of “Worship of Sorrow,” and, expressing a synthesis of the German Romantic doctrine of duty and Carlyle’s own

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Calvinist work ethic, he posits "Duty" as the "true Ideal" (pp. 196–97). For Carlyle, who depicts the tragic Teufelsdröckh as being driven to this "Worship of Sorrow" by suffering, suffering precludes the comic, whereas for Kierkegaard the comic arises from suffering, and "the tragic and the comic are one."

This last notion, which was by no means new with Kierkegaard, also emerges in his discussions of the two foremost orientations toward the comical: irony and humor. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846) Climacus defines irony as the *confinium* of the aesthetic stage of existence, and humor as the *confinium* of the ethical. Kierkegaard's understanding of both irony and humor, however, must be understood in the context not of one work, but of his whole corpus of writings.

Germinal strands to Kierkegaard's conception of irony's relation to the different existential stages are found in his doctoral dissertation, *The Concept of Irony* (1841), which examines Socratic irony and the Romantic irony of Friedrich Schlegel, Tieck, and Solger. As far as he is concerned, the terms "irony" and "ironist" are synonymous with "romanticism" and "romanticist": "Both designate the same thing. The one suggests more the name with which the movement christened itself, the other the name with which Hegel christened it." Kierkegaard's discussion of Romantic irony anticipates views later expressed by the aesthetic narrator of "Diary of a Seducer," Johannes (Either/Or's "A"), just as the attitude that Kierkegaard expresses toward Romanticism foreshadows Judge William's ("B's") ethical criticisms of the aesthete. Adapting Hegel's definition, Kierkegaard speaks of irony as "infinite absolute negativity," and argues that "irony no longer directs itself against . . . a particular thing [Tilværende]; that "the whole of existence [Tilværelse] has become alien to the ironic subject," who "in turn has become estranged from existence [Tilværelse]”; and that "because actuality has lost its validity for him, so he, too, is to a certain extent no longer actual."

Kierkegaard must be distinguished from the German Romantic theorists and Carlyle, who regard irony primarily as an artistic device whereby the poet, aware that his or her creation is not real, may tease the reader. For Kierkegaard irony is primarily an existential category. His analysis in *The Concept of Irony* focuses not on the ironist's artistic effect, but rather on the particular existential stage in which the ironist is located. This becomes explicit in Postscript:

Irony is an existential determination, and nothing is more ridiculous than to suppose that it consists in the use of certain phraseol-
ogy, or when an author congratulates himself upon succeeding in expressing himself ironically. Whoever has essential irony has it all day long, not bound to any specific form, because it is the infinite within him.60

This principle finds its most memorable incarnation in Johannes the Seducer who, upon withdrawing entirely into infinite reflection, loses his self, falls into despair, and breaks off his engagement from his beloved because he knows that to settle upon the finite "possibility" of marriage would bring his reflection upon it and upon all other possibilities to an end. As exemplified by the Seducer, existence in the ironic phase is highly precarious. In an 1837 journal entry, Kierkegaard describes existence as "self-overcoming," and observes, "The ironical position is essentially: nil admirari; but irony, when it slays itself, has disdained everything with humor, itself included."61 This notion is developed in later entries, where irony is no longer seen as merely destructive of itself. In an entry of 1838, he asserts that it "ends by killing the individual,"62 and in one of 1848 he claims: "Irony is a kind of hypersthenia which, as is well known, may be fatal."63

To escape the despair of aesthetic existence and the self-destructive fate of irony, one must choose one's self and commit oneself to an ethical absolute. This is the doctrine of Judge William, who urges the aesthete "A" to acquire his self by choosing to marry. There is a rough analogy between the transition from the aesthetic to the ethical stage implicit in Either/Or's two parts, and Teufelsdröckh's spiritual conversion in Carlyle's Sartor. Teufelsdröckh renounces aesthetic pleasure and his pursuit of it in order to commit himself to the "Worship of Sorrow" and Goethe's ethical doctrine of duty: "Do the Duty which lies nearest thee! Which thou knowest to be a Duty!" (p. 196). Likewise, the aesthetic stage in Either/Or is characterized by the Seducer's pursuit of pleasure without commitment, while the ethical stage is characterized by the Judge's commitment to marriage and duty. As Teufelsdröckh is driven to his conversion by the throes of despair, so the aesthete's despair may lead him to the ethical choice.

Kierkegaard's own position, however, is no more "summed up" by the ethicist than it is by the aesthete, for Kierkegaard obviously recognizes negative as well as positive aspects in the ethical. Judge William repeatedly upbraids the young aesthete for his habitual use of sarcasm and mockery. But the Judge admits that "with a certain reluctance [I] feel that you dazzle me, that I let myself be carried away by your

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exuberance, by the seemingly good-natured wittiness with which you mock everything, let myself be carried away into the same esthetic-intellectual intoxication in which you live." Elsewhere he suggests that his friend's sarcastic remarks are "dangerous for young people." He sees right through the aesthete's irony and discerns the sorrow concealed in the latter's laughter, calling it "the laughter of despair," since "the spirit does not allow itself to be mocked, and the gloom of depression thickens around you, and the lightning flash of a demented witticism only shows you yourself that it is even more dense, more terrible." In contrast to the aesthete's lack of discrimination about what he sees as comical and worthy of mockery, the Judge, in keeping with his own dogmatic emphasis on decision and duty, chooses what to consider comical and dutifully avoids laughing at whatever he decides is not comical. Aware that his age resounds in "light-minded laughter," he deems three subjects taboo to laugh at: marriage, love, and achievement. In addition, reflecting Kierkegaard's lifelong inclination toward solitude and what he called his "devil of wit," the Judge considers it a moral delict for a person to laugh when alone, because to do so alienates one's friends, and "the devil is also said to laugh when he is alone." As late as 1848 Kierkegaard would construe laughter as "the devil's invention," an idea that calls to mind Teufelsdrockh's recognition of sarcasm as "the language of the Devil." Indeed, Judge William's ethical condemnation of aesthetic mockery parallels Carlyle's censure of Voltaire's mockery, ridicule, and wit.

There is another explanation for why the person who laughs in solitude appears "devilish" to the ethicist. Throughout his papers Judge William argues that the ethical is determined by self-revelation. As long as one deceives others and hides oneself, one remains in the aesthetic stage. Vigilius Haufniensis identifies the "demonical" with the opposite of self-revelation: "shut-upness" (det Indesluttede, or Indesluttedhed). In defiance of the Judge's precept of self-revelation, but in keeping with devilish "shut-upness," the lone laugher conceals from others both the fact that he is laughing and the object of his laughter. This syndrome may be particularly aggravating to an ethicist, since the solitary laugher can so rarely be caught in the act. Hence the Judge betrays an almost perverse curiosity regarding the question of whether "A" laughs alone.

Judge William's indictment of mockery and laughter reflects Kierkegaard's preoccupation with the truism that laughter can be used for malicious ends. Accordingly Climacus advocates an ethical temperance of laughter as a prevention against rudeness, and Kierkegaard, after being publicly ridiculed in the notorious Corsair Affair (1846),
expresses in his journal his scorn for the immoral use of comedy in the plays of Scribe and Holberg.\textsuperscript{78}

While mockery represents an abuse of the comical, the excessively stringent ethicist risks losing his comic sense altogether. This is implied in \textit{Either/Or II}, where the Judge's exaggerated sternness toward the comical betrays the wilting of his sense for the comic. Thus, in an 1845 journal entry, Kierkegaard hypothesizes that if one were to tell a flippant and hilarious person to be "ethically responsible" in his use of the comic, "and then he took time to understand this, his \textit{vis comica} would cease—that is, it would be unauthorized."\textsuperscript{79} Climacus likewise observes: "The ethicist who has irony as his incognito . . ., assures himself of justification only through constantly holding himself to the ethical, and therefore sees the comical as constantly vanishing."\textsuperscript{80} In an 1848 journal entry, Kierkegaard singles out the ethicist's characteristic "earnestness" as a potential threat to one's capacity to laugh: "Of course, if I were or imagined pure earnestness, absolutely ideally, there would be nothing laughable, for this earnestness always points ethically at a man and therefore finds nothing to laugh at but finds the same thing to weep over instead."\textsuperscript{81} An 1845 entry already cautioned that "he who does not constantly dare to submit his earnestness to the test of jest is stupid and comical."\textsuperscript{82} Here the term "jest" stands in emphatic contrast to "earnestness," since Kierkegaard—as the Hongs note—"wants to emphasize that all human efforts must be regarded as a jest in relation to the infinite ethical requirement that confronts man; man is saved by grace alone."\textsuperscript{83}

Vigilius too points out the danger of overseriousness. Counterbalancing Judge William's notion that it is unethical to laugh at certain subjects, Vigilius suggests that it is improper to be too serious about the wrong object. One's self is the only proper object for one's seriousness, and the person who is overly serious about anything else "shall \textit{deo volente} end by being comic."\textsuperscript{84} In order for persons not to turn into "serious-minded buffoons," seriousness must be balanced by a sense for the comic. This idea crystallizes with the humorist Quidam, who conceives of a "true" kind of earnestness, and a false kind which excludes the comical completely and is often mistaken for "religiousness." Quidam calls the latter type "stupidity," and suggests that to guard against it "the comic ought to be used to keep order in the sphere of the religious."\textsuperscript{85} He characterizes "true earnestness" as "the unity of jest and seriousness,"\textsuperscript{86} and points to Socrates as the embodiment of this unity, since "his sense of the comic was just as great as his ethical pathos."\textsuperscript{87}
Climacus reiterates the importance of this balance in more abstract terms:

That the subjective existing thinker is as positive as he is negative, can also be expressed by saying that he is as sensitive to the comic as to the pathetic. As men ordinarily live, the comic and pathetic are divided, so that one person has the one and another person has the other, one person a little more of the one, another, a little less. But for anyone who exists in a double reflection, the proportions are equal.88

Judge William clearly lacks this Socratic balance between comic sense and ethical pathos. While condemning the aesthete's promiscuous mockery, he fails to submit his own earnestness to "the test of jest," and seems to have lost his own comic sense—if he ever had one! Climacus finally protests against such ethical extremism and calls for a balance between the indiscriminate laughter to which the Judge objects and the excessive ethicism that he displays, and that threatens to wipe out laughter altogether:

Let the comic be brought to consciousness; it is no more immoral to laugh than it is to weep. But just as it is immoral to go around whining at all times, so it is also immoral to give oneself up to indiscriminate excitement which lies in laughing when one does not really know whether to laugh or not.89

Carlyle confronted this same polarity of seriousness and the *vis comica*, asserting that Voltaire's lack of earnestness and his propensity toward mockery diminished his status as a man, and denouncing "the man who cannot laugh" through the voice of Sartor's fictive Editor. For Carlyle and Kierkegaard alike, overindulgence in laughter leads negatively to mockery, ridicule, sarcasm, and a want of earnestness, all of which are typified by Voltaire (in Carlyle's view) and the aesthete (in Kierkegaard's). They take opposite stands, however, regarding the inability to laugh. For Carlyle that inability betrays an unethical character (i.e., a "treason and stratagem"), while for Kierkegaard a loss of the comic sense and death of laughter suggest an overly ethical character.

Like Carlyle, for whom true humor consists of a mixture of sport and sensibility, Kierkegaard conceives of a genuine, true humor. But for Kierkegaard, who develops the concept much further than does Carlyle, humor becomes essentially linked to existence and religiousness.90 In his
early formulation of it, which is based on the same principle of contra-
diction as the comical, humor bears a divine connotation. In The Concept
of Irony the topic of humor and its distinction from irony is raised only
once—in the book’s last paragraph. There, the association with divinity
is explicit in his claim that “humor contains a deeper positivity than
irony, for it does not move itself in humanistic determinations but
anthropic determinations; it does not find repose in making man
human, but in making man God-man.” In a journal entry from several
years earlier (1837), humor and its possessors are linked with the divine:
“Humorists develop God’s side (Mohammed etc. Pythagoras/‘Realists’—the human side).” Another entry implies an analogy between
humor’s eclipse of irony and Christianity’s superseding of Judaism: “If
someone says that irony and humor are identical, only different in
degrees, I will say what Paul says of the relationship of Christianity to
Judaism: ‘All is new.’” In this early period (still in 1837), Kierkegaard
identifies specific utterances of Jesus in which there is discernible
humor and points to general principles of Christianity that may be
viewed as humorous.

Kierkegaard originally esteems humor as the proper Christian
attitude toward the future and as a protective incognito to be used in
dealing with worldly matters and with people who do not share in the
Christian faith. But he later interprets humor more as an ethical passion
than as a religious one. While the despair of irony characterizes the
individual who has reached the limit of the aesthetic stage, humor
characterizes someone’s self at the end of the ethical stage, and it
becomes a transitional phase between the ethical and the religious, or in
Climacus’s words, “the last terminus a quo in relation to the Christian
type of the religious.” As the boundary for the religiousness of the
hidden inwardness, humor “comprehends guilt-consciousness as a
totality.”

As a prompter to one’s awareness of oneself as guilty before God,
humor is linked with repentance, which represents the ultimate act of
autonomous freedom and the highest act of the ethical. But humor
distinguishes itself in two important ways from that lower level of the
ethical embodied in Judge William. First, whereas the Judge’s ethical
earnestness threatens to extinguish his comic sense, humor—in
Climacus’s words—“discovers the comic by putting the total guilt
together with the relativity as between man and man. The comic lies in
the fact that the total guilt is the foundation which supports the whole
comedy.” To this insight the Judge remains blind. Though he often
speaks of repentance, he would think it sinful even to intimate that there
is anything comedic about "total guilt."

Second, in contrast to Judge William's espousal of self-revelation, the humorist is characterized by inwardness. Humor possesses inner contradictions that preclude the possibility of its being communicated directly, and for this reason the humorist cannot be detected by others. Climacus, who discusses how the humorist's attempts at self-expression are distorted by other people, points out that the humorist's "eternal recollection of guilt cannot be expressed outwardly, it is incommensurable with such an expression, since every outward expression finitizes guilt. But the eternal recollection of guilt which characterizes the hidden inwardness is anything but despair; for despair is always the infinite." This association of the humorist with inwardness and ineffability can be traced back to some of Kierkegaard's early journal entries. In an 1837 entry, he denies that genuine humor can "be caught" in a novel, as is evidenced by the "disinclination" of humorists to express themselves in writing, which he attributes to the assumption that "not-to-write is part of the nature of the concept [of humor], since this would betray an all too conciliatory position to the world." Conceived as someone holding this unconciliatory stance toward the world, the humorist is seen—in anticipation of Freud's theory of humor as something that can be complete without being communicated—as an isolated figure, one who is alienated from society. Thus, after calling Hamann "the greatest and most authentic humorist," Kierkegaard compares him to a "genuinely humorous Robinson Crusoe... in the noise of life." Elsewhere he asserts: "The humorist, like the beast of prey, always walks alone."

Carlyle would probably disagree with Kierkegaard's notion that genuine humor cannot be conveyed without becoming distorted. Not the least among the qualities Carlyle admires in Jean Paul is his mode of conveying his humor. As a stylist and master of the "Extra-harangue," Jean Paul is celebrated for his ironic literary technique. But Kierkegaard reveres Hamann as the greatest humorist precisely because his humor "cannot be caught" in writing. Accordingly, his evaluation of Jean Paul differs from Carlyle's. While owning the first edition of Jean Paul's complete works (Berlin, 1826–1838) and acknowledging him to be "the greatest humorist capitalist," Kierkegaard speaks of him as a mere aesthete who mixes together irony, humor, and the language of caprice.

Despite this difference, however, Kierkegaard and Carlyle agree on other significant points pertaining to humor. As Carlyle considers
humor an indicator of a great character and genius, so Kierkegaard extols “maturely reflective” humor as “an unshakable, authentic frame of mind related to genius,” and Climacus cites sensitivity to the comical as a criterion by which one’s spiritual authority is to be judged. And despite his emphasis on the inwardness and ineffability of genuine humor, Kierkegaard’s eulogizing of the “profound sensibility and enormous genius” of Hamann’s humor—a phrase that recalls Carlyle’s laud of Jean Paul’s “sportive sensibility” and “genius”—is based on his reading of Hamann’s works, which must presuppose an outward, apprehensible dimension in his humor. At the same time, Carlyle describes Richter’s genuine humor as a faculty that, “like a fine essence, a soul,” lies “deeper” than all others and as a “fire that pervades and vivifies his whole being.” All of these associations locate humor deep inside the humorist and are suggestive of a quality like that “inwardness” that Kierkegaard attributes to humor. Hence Carlyle, like Kierkegaard, conceives of an unfathomable aspect of humor that cannot be recognized by other people, since it lies concealed within the humorist. Concealed in Jean Paul’s smile, as cited earlier, he discerns a touching pathos, “a pity too deep for tears.”

IV

To what conclusion might the foregoing comparison of the notions of irony, humor, and laughter in Kierkegaard and Carlyle lead?

Both Kierkegaard and Carlyle view humor as decidedly higher than irony, though Carlyle regards outward laughter much more favorably than does Kierkegaard. Carlyle, whose humorous sense exists in tension with his melancholy, recognizes the true humorist as one whose smile conceals a “pathos.” Kierkegaard balances the same duality of melancholy and humor and likewise recognizes a pathos beneath the humorist’s smile. His notion that unchecked ethical seriousness can extinguish the vis comica is counterbalanced by Climacus’s recommendation that “the vis comica should not stifle the pathetic, but rather serve [as] an indication that a new pathos is beginning.” The dialectical relationship between pathos and the comic informs his notion of the humorist as someone in whom “suffering” and “jest” are equally essential.

Since an existing humorist presents the closest approximation to the religious, he has also an essential conception of the suffering in
which life is involved, in that he ... exists so that suffering for him
is relevant to existence. But at that point the humorist turns decep-
tively aside and revokes the suffering in the form of the jest. He
comprehends the significance of suffering as relevant to existence,
but he does not comprehend the significance of the suffering
itself. . . . The first thought is the pain in the humoristic conscious-
ness, the second is the jest, and hence it comes about that one is
tempted both to weep and laugh when the humorist speaks.113

This idea bears a remarkable resemblance to Carlyle's notion that Jean
Paul “can change a laughing face into a sad one.”

In Kierkegaard's and Carlyle's concepts of humor, one ever senses
the presence of melancholy. For Carlyle the smile “hides a pathos,” and
the laughing face can be transformed into a sad one instantaneously by
the humorist. Hence laughs and smiles become deceptive signs. Similar-
ly, for Kierkegaard the humorist's smile hides an inward “suffering,”
and so when the humorist speaks, one becomes confused and is
“tempted both to weep and laugh.” The ethicist does not laugh. And
the aesthete's laughter betrays not mirth, but rather what Judge William
calls “the laughter of despair.”

The concepts of irony, humor, and laughter in Carlyle and
Kierkegaard must be considered in their dialectical relationship with
the theme of suffering and melancholy. Sensibility and sport, earnest-
ness and the vis comica, laughter and tears, suffering and jest, melan-
choly and mirth: these pairs of opposites are encountered repeatedly in
both men's lives, thought, and writings. To overlook the bearing of
suffering on Kierkegaard's notion of the humorist, or the pathos inherent
in Carlyle's concept of true humor; to miss the despair beneath the
sarcastic laugh of Kierkegaard's ironist, or the bitterness with which
Carlyle reconciles himself to his own inveterate tendency toward
irony—to do any of these things would be a mistake.

Yet the dialectic must never be lost sight of. One cannot understand
Carlyle's "gloom" without taking into account the laugh and humorous
sense with which it persists in tension. Nor can one fathom Kierkegaard's
"melancholy" without recognizing that for him "the tragic and the
comic are one and the same." Ironically, to fail to discern the humorous
sense that underlies these two men's thought and writings would be a
comment not so much upon their vires comicae as upon ours.
Notes


4. Henri Plard, “Le ‘Sartor Resartus’ de Carlyle et Jean Paul,” Etudes Germaniques (Jan.–Mar. 1961), no. 1, p. 116. However, Plard notes correctly that Carlyle’s conception of Christianity as “the highest instance of Hero-worship” would have revolted Kierkegaard, who saw Christ as separated from a world that is totally “other” (p. 117).


15. Harrold, Carlyle and German Thought, p. 27.


18. Cited by Sanders, intro. to ibid., 1:xxxviii.


23. Ibid., 1:22.

24. Ibid.


27. Carlyle, Essays, 2:21. Unlike Voltaire, according to Carlyle, “all great men have been careful to subordinate this talent or habit of ridicule” (2:22).

28. Ibid., 2:60.

29. Pirandello, Humor, p. 8:

[Romantic] irony consists in the poet’s never identifying himself completely with his own work, in his remaining fully aware, even in the moments of pathos, of the unreality of his creations, in not becoming the stooge of the phantoms created by his own imagination, and in laughing at the reader who is drawn into the game and also at himself who devotes his life to playing.

30. See Harrold, intro. to Sartor, pp. xxxvi–vii; Jerry A. Dibble, The Pythia’s Drunken Song: Thomas Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus and the Style Problem in German

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"The Laughter of Despair"


32. All quotes of Sartor are drawn from Harrold's edition.

33. See Dibble, Pythia's Drunken Song, p. 6.


35. In his famous commentary on Sartor, sent in the form of a letter to Carlyle in 1835, John Sterling refers to Richter as Teufelsdröckh's "prototype" (Appendix to Carlyle, Sartor, p. 308). Plard similarly asserts that the Germany portrayed in Sartor is modeled after the works of Hoffmann and Richter, and that Teufelsdröckh's characteristics are based on Carlyle's image of Richter ("Le 'Sartor Resartus,'" pp. 119–20). Tennyson suggests that the book's literary style, and even the hero's full name, which links the opposite images of "Born of God" (Diogenes) and "Devil's Dung" (Teufelsdröckh), reflect Richter's theory of humor as stemming from the contrast of the infinite and the finite (Sartor Called Resartus, p. 277). For J. Macmillan Brown, the name Teufelsdröckh suggests "the pungent humour in which it was [Carlyle's] nature to indulge, humour that often rose into repulsiveness, if not into offensive coarseness," just as Diogenes, the austere, solitary, self-centered cynic philosopher who used "biting humour and sweeping maxims and repartees," represents those same qualities Carlyle recognized in himself (The "Sartor Resartus" of Carlyle [London: Whitcombe, (n.d.)], pp. 7, 9). Cf. Waring, Carlyle, p. 51. Maulsby suggests that "the whole of Teufelsdröckh is drawn from Carlyle's consciousness," and that he "was made by a process of gradual accretion, through years of reading, writing, observing, and inner experience" (Growth of Sartor, pp. 12–13). Albert J. LaValley sees Richter reflected in Teufelsdröckh's "bizarre side," and Carlyle reflected in the fictive Editor. LaValley further suggests that Carlyle, through the Editor's voice, "becomes one with the figure he expounds [i.e., Teufelsdröckh/Richter], absorbing the vision he seeks to understand and give to the public" (Carlyle and the Idea of the Modern: Studies in Carlyle's Prophetic Literature and Its Relation to Blake, Nietzsche, Marx, and Others [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968], p. 34.

36. See note 12 above.


39. Ibid., pp. 448–49.


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42. In the *New Yorker*, 25 May 1968, p. 141ff.
43. Lowrie, *Kierkegaard*, pp. 11, 60.
48. Ibid., p. 60.
52. Ibid., p. 467.
54. Ibid., 1:145.

whereas Shakespeare holds in balance tragic pain and comic fecklessness even while intertwining them, his successors in attempting such a union find tragedy and comedy blurring into an ambiguous composite: instead of tragicomedy, the seventeenth century produces satire, the eighteenth century sentiment, the nineteenth century irony. (*Shandyism*, p. 1)


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62. Ibid., 2:262.
63. Ibid., 2:270.
64. Kierkegaard, Either/Or, 2:16.
65. Ibid., 2:80.
66. Ibid., 2:205.
67. Ibid., 2:23.
69. Ibid., 2:301.
70. Ibid., 2:79.
73. Kierkegaard, Journals, 2:272.
76. See Kierkegaard, Either/Or, 2:326.
77. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 462, n.
78. Some of his remarks on this subject recall Socrates' attitude toward poetry in Plato's Republic. For example, Kierkegaard, Journals, 2:273, 275.
82. Ibid., 2:267.
83. Ibid., 2:605, n.
84. Kierkegaard, Dread, p. 133.
86. Ibid., p. 365.
87. Ibid., p. 366.
88. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 81.

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89. Ibid., p. 462, n.


93. Ibid., 2:261–62.

94. Ibid., 2:254.

95. Ibid., 2:252.

96. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 258.

97. Ibid., p. 489.


102. Ibid., p. 492.


105. Kierkegaard, Journals, 2:258.

106. Ibid., p. 263.

107. Ibid., 2:257.


110. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 250.

113. Ibid., p. 400.