

# THE MASTER THIEF, ALIAS S. KIERKEGAARD, AND HIS ROBBERY OF THE TRUTH

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"I am amazed that (as far as I know) no one has ever treated *the idea of a 'master-thief,'* an idea that certainly would lend itself very well to dramatic treatment." (*Pap. I A 11*, September 12, 1834; *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, eds. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, no. 5061)

As Søren Kierkegaard wonders here, I too wonder why nobody – to my knowledge – has investigated the role played by the Master Thief in Kierkegaard's writings. In the following article, I will therefore focus on this theme.

From the autumn of 1834 and the following half year, Kierkegaard outlined his ideas of a figure he calls "the master thief,"<sup>i[i]</sup> an idea that he occasionally takes up in his subsequent writings, particularly the pseudonymous ones. According to Kierkegaard, the Master Thief is a humorist, yet also a melancholic character. He is dissatisfied with the established order, and therefore aims, by teasing the authorities, to disclose the true nature of what they claim to be justice. In a way, then, the Master Thief can, according to Kierkegaard, be considered a martyr, because he willingly accepts his punishment – "as a man who is conscious of having lived for an idea" (*Pap. I A 12; Journals and Papers*, no. 5062). This predication is precisely what Kierkegaard later expresses his own hopes for in the *Point of View*.<sup>ii[iii]</sup> Such a figure might not be a martyr in the mold of Christ, but would certainly be a martyr in the mold of Socrates – at least in the mold of the Socrates we encounter in Kierkegaard's writings!

It is thus the very same Master Thief who, twelve years after his earliest portrayal in the Papers, gets (or snatches back) the last word in what, at that point, was intended to be the final work in Kierkegaard's authorship: the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

## What and how

The final chapter of this work, chapter 5, is a strange "conclusion," which only *indirectly* sums up what precedes it. The chapter is divided into three sections, the last of which was entitled "Being a Christian is defined subjectively in this way." Climacus opens this section by stating that: "Being a Christian is defined not by the 'what' of Christianity but by the 'how' of the Christian" (*Postscript*, trans. Hong, p. 610). The problem with being defined by a "what" is that it is something that is objective and exterior and thus completely incommensurate with the Christian inwardness that Kierkegaard insists upon. A little later, a connection is drawn between the one who seeks to be a Christian and the ironical observer/writer. Climacus describes ironical observation as follows: "All ironical observing is a matter of continually paying attention to 'how,' whereas the honorable gentleman with whom the ironist has the honor of dealing pays attention only to the 'what'." (Hong, p. 614). The gentleman whom the ironist has "the honor of dealing with" is none other than the reader.<sup>iii[iii]</sup> The reader is indirectly warned that he had better pay attention to the "how" of the ironist – and to himself, if he wants to part with the role of the honorable gentleman!

According to Climacus, the Christian "how" does not and cannot express itself directly. In order to recognize it, one must therefore possess the powers of ironical (self-) observation. Reading the *Postscript* thus requires this very kind of (self-) observation, if the reader is to

come to terms with the intricate relationship between earnest and jest in the text. What is required from the reader is, in this sense, *judgment*.

In developing his statements about "what" and "how," Climacus tells a sort of parable. This parable has, in a way, the *Postscript's* last word. I therefore quote it in full:

It is supposed to have happened in England that a man was assaulted on the highway by a robber disguised with a large wig. He rushes at the traveler, grabs him by the throat, and shouts: Your wallet. He takes the wallet, which he keeps, but he throws away the wig. A poor man comes down the same road, finds the wig, puts it on, and arrives in the next town, where the traveler has already given the alarm. He is recognized, arrested, and identified by the traveler, who swears that he is the man. By chance, the robber is present in the courtroom, sees the mistake, turns to the judge and says, "It seems to me that the traveler is looking more at the wig than at the man" and asks permission to make an experiment. He puts on the wig, grabs the traveler by the throat, and says: Your wallet – and the traveler recognizes the robber and offers to swear to it – but the trouble is that he already has sworn an oath. So it goes with everyone who in one way or another has a "what" and pays no attention to "how"; he swears, he takes an oath, he runs errands, he risks his life and blood, he is executed – all for the wig.

If my memory does not fail me, I have already told this story once before in this book; yet I wish to end the whole book with it. I do not think that anyone will in truth be able to accuse me ironically of having varied it in such a way that it has not remained the same. (Hong, pp. 615f.) (my italics)

The fact that Climacus permits this parable to conclude the whole book indicates that it indirectly sums up the "plot" of the work. The hero is a thief, a robber, the parable can therefore be said to be a "robber's tale" [*røverhistorie*], which in Danish means a story which is not to be believed at face value. It is typical of Climacus that he very consciously plays on Danish turns of phrase. The moral of the story could be expressed with just such a turn of phrase: "one shouldn't judge the dog by its hair" [*man skal ikke skue hunden på hårene*], which warns that appearances are deceiving. Here, the reader is warned that he shouldn't judge the robber (the writer) by the wig, i.e., that he should not consider his "what" as something independent of his "how."

In his *Journals and Papers* Kierkegaard writes the following about the Master Thief:

We could also imagine him as one who would make fools of a court, but we must regard this as a kind of jest about the whole thing and an expression in deed of a vanity entirely consistent with his idea. He will never abandon candour, and he will come with his own confession as soon as he has demonstrated how he *could* hoodwink a court. (*Pap.* I A 12, 17 September 1834; *Journals and Papers*, no. 5062).

In this way, the Master Thief, just like Climacus, mixes jest and earnest. His truest robbery occurs in the courtroom, where his intervention prompts the victim of the robbery to become aware of the unreasonableness of his own *judgment* – a loss far greater than the loss of the wallet; a loss, furthermore, that the reader of Climacus has been warned against!

### **Irony's deceitful tongue**

In *The Postscript* the parable of the robber is a twice-told tale; it has already been told in the chapter "An Expression of Gratitude to Lessing." It is worth noting what is implied by the concluding remark of chapter 5, where Climacus comments upon retelling the tale, "I do not think that anyone will in truth be able to accuse me ironically of having varied it in such a way that it has not remained the same" (Hong, p. 616), namely, that the reader might also accuse Climacus of having changed, of being someone he is not. He assumes the place of the plaintiff in order to make the reader take the place of the robbed one. It is assumed that the reader is keen to judge; the reader is, as was mentioned, indirectly warned not to repeat

the – quite as serious – crime of committing perjury through hasty judgment. That this, in fact, is what Climacus expects from the reader is evident from the first time the tale of the robber is told.

This complements Climacus' praise of Lessing because the later did not say anything against or in favor of Christianity in such a way that anyone would have anything to bear witness to:

It was a misuse of his dialectical skill that he must necessarily occasion them to swear falsely (since they necessarily had to swear), both when they swore that what he said now was the same as what he had said before because the form and clothing were the same, and also when they swore that what he said now was not the same because the form and the clothing had changed" (Hong, pp. 68f).

Those who are too eager to swear are scorned, and at the same time warned not to believe that there is a straightforward relation between signifier and signified, – the lesson *per se* of the ironist. We should not follow in the footsteps of the man who "should have prudently confined himself to swearing that he recognized the wig" (Hong, p. 69). We cannot catch the ironist on his statements, and do wisely in not swearing upon them.

Climacus' conclusion in chapter 5 can thus be understood as an anticipation of the judgment that one could expect from a reader, a judgment on whether the book speaks for or against Christianity, and a judgment, furthermore, on whether it is the author himself which is speaking to us. So how should we judge the Master Thief, alias the "ironist," alias Climacus? Well, in his *Journals and Papers* Kierkegaard writes the following:

"(...) while the authorities are in pursuit to capture him, and the populace, on the other hand, regards him suspiciously as one who is, after all, a thief, although perhaps an inner voice sometimes speaks in his defence, and at the same time he finds no encouragement and comfort among the other thieves since they are far inferior to him and are dominated by viciousness. The only possible association he can have with them is solely for the purpose of using them to achieve his aims; otherwise he must despise them." (*Pap.* I a 11, September 12, 1834; *Journals and Papers*, no. 5061).

This Master Thief is again clearly reminiscent of Socrates, as well as of Climacus/Kierkegaard.<sup>iv[iv]</sup> In the case of Socrates, the other thieves could obviously represent the Sophists. In the case of Climacus/Kierkegaard, the authorities could be the Danish state church, and "the other thieves" are could be equivalent to various 'freethinkers' – while Climacus/Kierkegaard could of course occupy the role of a 'believing freethinker.'

The latter parallel becomes even more evident from what Climacus further writes in the chapter on Lessing. His tribute to the German writer increasingly seems an indirect self-portrait:

"And now his [Lessing's, my comment] style! (...) This stylistic nonchalance that works out a simile down to the minutest detail, as if the presentation itself had a value (...) This mixture of jest and earnestness that makes it impossible for a third person to know definitely which is which – unless the third person knows it by himself." (Hong, p. 69).

This ironical 'mixture of jest and earnestness, which Climacus excels in, is what another pseudonym, Constantin Constantius of *Repetition*, hails, in another play on a Danish idiom, hails as the **thieves' tongue** [*røversprog*] of the ironist.<sup>v[v]</sup> This kind of language does not force any conclusion upon the reader, but helps him instead to reflect upon himself. The reader must, at his own peril, take responsibility for the way in which he understands the relationship between jest and earnestness in the text. The question of truth, then, turns out to be subjective question. In this way, Climacus compares Lessing's technique to that of his ideal ironist: Socrates.

Climacus opposes Lessing and Socrates to Hegel, who he scornfully points out should have died "with the words that no one understood him except one person, who misunderstood him" (Hong, p. 70, footnote). This statement presupposes that direct communication is possible and desirable, if not always successful in assumption Climacus views as a naïve idea, which Socrates, "who artistically arranged his entire method of communication so as to be misunderstood," did not share.

It is interesting that the Master Thief, as he is portrayed in the *Journals and Papers*, is also a misunderstood character: "Frequently the master-thief also feels extremely unhappy about his position, about his being regarded by many as branded; he feels *misunderstood* (tragically)" (*Pap.* I A 15, Feb. 9, 1835; *Journals and Papers*, no. 5074). Here, being misunderstood is a tragic fate, but the Master Thief quickly becomes a *humorist*, and later on being misunderstood in fact proves essential to the Kierkegaardian Master Thieves. Lessing, Socrates and Climacus all refuse to be (directly) understood!

### **The big question**

In the first passage of chapter 5 of *The Postscript* titled "Conclusion," Climacus indirectly depicts his own activity as a robber's assault:

"If there is anyone in our day whom Christianity disturbs, which I do not doubt and which can be demonstrated factually, one thing can be demanded of him – that he keep silent, because, viewed ethically, his discourse is a robber assault and its consequences is even worse, since it ends up with both having nothing, the robber and the victim." (Hong, p. 590, translation slightly modified).

If one reads this statement closely, it becomes evident that "nothing" can be understood as a positive designation since Climacus writes "both" instead of "either," indicating that there was no real loss.

What sort of "nothing" is it, then, that both end up with, if the robber is an ironist of the aforementioned kind? This "nothing," perhaps, is identical to the *nothing* which (according to Kierkegaard) a religious person must strive to become in order that "God can illuminate him" (*Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, tr. Hong, p. 399). Such a *nothing* can, if it is truly maintained in existence – as, according to Climacus, is the case with Socrates – become an analogy to faith and may even constitute a stepping stone for the leap that Faith requires. The robbery, in short, serves a higher purpose.

As Kierkegaard puts it in his *Christian Discourses*, in parallel to Climacus's parable of the robber:

"But his discourse of immortality - yes, it aims to violate public or, more correctly here, private security.... It is as an assault, bold as an assault in broad daylight, as terrifying as an assault at night.... It divides people into the righteous and the unrighteous, and in so doing asks you whether you count yourself among the righteous or among the unrighteous. It places this question in the closest connection with immortality – indeed, it does not speak about immortality but about this distinction. Is that not like an assault! (Hong p. 202-203).

The truth of Christianity is a *personal question*. The question concerns nothing less than the divine salvation of the individual. Moreover, this question robs the individual of his own (illusory) security. In *The Postscript*, the meaning of the text becomes inseparable from the question of the reader's belief. In this courtroom, where we presume that we are the ones to judge, it turns out that we are the ones charged. The jest is earnest indeed: '*Judge and thee shall be judged*'.<sup>vi[vi]</sup>

### **The holy, universal, ironic teacher**

After chapter 5 of *The Postscript* follows an "Appendix" where Climacus seals his message in a truly performative fashion:

"Just as in Catholic books, especially from former times, one finds a note at the back of the book that notifies the reader that everything is to be understood in accordance with the teaching of the holy universal mother Church, so also what I write contains the notice that everything is to be understood in such a way that it is revoked, that the book has not only an end but has a revocation to boot. One can ask for no more than that, either before or afterward." (Hong, p. 619).

Master Thief is thus not without dogmas of his own. The revocation of whatever is stated *is* his own "holy universal" dogma, comparable according to Climacus, even to the teachings of the Catholic mother church – an added twist to the thief's ironical game with the reader! This twist corresponds to the remark, cited above, that the Master Thief "will come with his own confession as soon as he has demonstrated how he *could* hoodwink a court" (*Pap. I A 12*, September 17, 1834). Such a confession effectively robs the putatively objective "truth of the matter" of whatever authority it might possess. When *Climacus* himself makes such a confession, he leaves the reader in a state of uncertainty: the reader must, at his own peril, judge for himself. In the end, therefore, the Master Thief always gets (or snatches back) the last word.

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<sup>i[i]</sup> In Malantschuk's opinion, "Kierkegaard's speculations on 'the master-thief' were motivated by a desire to find moral support for his spying observation of his father" (*Kierkegaard's Thought*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 27. But this explanation does not take into account the figure's importance for Kierkegaard's authorship as a whole. In that larger context, the Master Thief's predisposition to espionage makes good sense: there are clear parallels between the Master Thief and Kierkegaard's other archetype, "the agile spy": both stand outside society, and aim to disclose its untruth.

<sup>ii[iii]</sup> See *The Point of View*, Part 2, at the beginning of the "Conclusion": "I have nothing more to say, but in conclusion I will allow someone else to speak, my poet, who, when he comes, will usher me to the place among those who suffered for an idea" (*Point of View*, tr. Hong, p. 95).

<sup>iii[iii]</sup> In describing his relationship to his reader, Climacus in fact uses the expression "*(ind)lader sig med*," to "admit oneself to the company of" the reader. See *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, tr. Hong, p. 325: The "communication must be marked like this, not directly, of course, for it cannot be communicated directly between man and man... (*thi det lader sig mellem Mand og Mand ikke meddele ligefrem*)."

<sup>iv[iv]</sup> However, in his well-known afterword, Kierkegaard underscores that the pseudonyms' writings are not to be mistaken for Kierkegaard's own. Thus, although Climacus's ideals and reflection are so near to Kierkegaard's own, they cannot be thought of as the same person. Only the "wigs" are the same!

<sup>v[v]</sup> Hong's translation ignores this. See *Fear and Trembling; Repetition*, tr. Hong, p. 145. The ironist "can express everything in his jargon [*Tyvesprog*, lit. thieves' tongue], and so sigh is so deep that he does not have the laughter that corresponds to it in his jargon [*Tyvesprog*], and no request is so obtrusive that he doesn't have the witticism to fulfill the demand."

<sup>vi[vi]</sup> Anti-Climacus makes the following comment about Climacus (though without mentioning his name) in *Practice in Christianity*, tr. Hong: "One presents faith in the eminent sense, and represents it in such a way that the most orthodox sees it as a defense of the faith and the atheist sees it as an attack, while the communicator is a zero, a nonperson, an objective something" (133). So while the text doesn't present us for an objectively truth (an attack or a defense) it becomes clear by our judgment "who is a believer, who the atheist" (134).