

## RECONCILIATION WITH FINITUDE: NARRATIVE SELFHOOD IN KIERKEGAARD'S *EITHER/OR*

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Søren Kierkegaard's authorship is notoriously enigmatic. Writing under a long list of pseudonyms, and speaking in a variety of voices that articulate competing worldviews and philosophical perspectives, Kierkegaard escapes any easy categorization (as, for instance, the "father of existentialism"). While this authorial complexity can serve as a stumbling block to some, it has led to the proliferation of a robust and interpretively diverse body of scholarly conversations. One such scholarly conversation that has developed in the contemporary literature approaches Kierkegaard's authorship narratologically, engaging his texts through the lens of questions relating to narrative identity and self-interpretation. Scholars such as Joakim Garff, K. Brian Söderquist, and John J. Davenport each take this narratological and hermeneutical approach in their own distinctive ways. Against the background of this burgeoning field of Kierkegaard scholarship, I will take a narrative approach to Kierkegaard's corpus in the following paper, focusing primarily on *Either/Or* (1843) and the theory of narrative selfhood developed therein.

The papers of the pseudonymous "Judge Wilhelm" that compose the second part of *Either/Or* offer a kind of roadmap for the task of selfhood, the task with which Kierkegaard is so singularly concerned throughout his authorship. Especially in his second letter, which Victor Eremita—the pseudonymous "editor" of *Either/Or*—has entitled "Equilibrium Between the Aesthetic and the Ethical in the Development of Personality," Wilhelm details the various moves one

must make and the various interior stages one must undergo in order to “win what is the main thing in life”: one’s self.<sup>1</sup> What then are these movements and these stages? How does Wilhelm understand the process by which a human being is able to become the self that she is?

Of course, there are many angles from which one might approach Kierkegaard’s text to wrest from it responses to these questions and others like them. And indeed, as much recent Kierkegaard scholarship has demonstrated, it is hardly a simple task to pin down with precision any clear and consistent philosophical positions in the polyphony of voices that speak out from the pseudonymous authorship. Kierkegaard’s texts—*Either/Or* included—are hermeneutically demanding, abounding with a semantic surplus that calls for constant interpretive vigilance.<sup>2</sup> As Joakim Garff rightly notes, “The plurality of voices, pens, positions, and literary jokers—which are also present in the most philosophical parts of the work (the *Fragments* and *Postscript*)—necessitates a never resting attentiveness on behalf of the reader. The reader must have a dual view, which not only grasps *what* Kierkegaard writes, but also *how* he writes what he writes.”<sup>3</sup> With the hermeneutic complexity of Kierkegaard’s authorship in mind, this paper does not pretend to capture the full scope of what is going on in Wilhelm’s letters. Instead, this essay will provide one angle one might take when approaching Wilhelm’s roadmap, an angle I will argue provides rich insight into the structure of human selfhood as Wilhelm sees it and as it appears elsewhere

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<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, Translated by Alastair Hannay, (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 482.

<sup>2</sup> For deconstructive readings of *Either/Or* that are attentive to the implications of this hermeneutic complexity, see Elsebet Jegstrup’s *The New Kierkegaard* (2004, p. 14-87).

<sup>3</sup> Joakim Garff, “‘The Esthetic is Above All My Element’”, *The New Kierkegaard* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 69.

throughout the authorship, despite this angle's inevitable hermeneutical limitations.

In the following paper, I will offer an account of Wilhelm's conception of selfhood and narrative identity as this conception appears in the second part of *Either/Or*, specifically in Wilhelm's second letter, "Equilibrium Between the Aesthetic and the Ethical." I will seek to illuminate the roadmap to which I gestured above, paying particularly close attention to the way in which Wilhelm understands the role of finitude and situatedness in the makeup of the human self. Thus, drawing upon other parts of the authorship—specifically *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) and *The Concept of Irony* (1841)—I will begin by offering a brief account of one way in which Kierkegaard seems to think that the individual can fail in the task of selfhood by not being properly attuned to the finite and concrete elements of the self that are outside of the individual's control. Having introduced this existential "wrong turn," I will then turn to Wilhelm's letter to examine his account of selfhood. Ultimately, I will argue that Wilhelm's roadmap offers a way back from this existential wrong turn, leading the human being into reconciliation with her finitude and all that it implies, equipping her to come into alignment with herself as the particular, concrete, finite self that she is.

## 1.2 The Wrong Turn

In the opening paragraph of *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Anti-Climacus describes the human being as "a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity."<sup>4</sup> In other words, similar to Jean-Paul Sartre's categories of transcendence and facticity (though dissimilar in important

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<sup>4</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, Translated by Alastair Hannay, (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 43.

ways),<sup>5</sup> a human being is not just freedom, will, or imagination (the infinite), but is also embodied, culturally and historically situated, intersubjectively determined, and socially embedded (the finite).

In many ways, this formula serves as the background against which Kierkegaard thinks through selfhood throughout his authorship. One way Kierkegaard seems to think the human being fails in the task of selfhood is by failing to bring these two dialectical poles of his existence into alignment, by overemphasizing the infinite part of the dialectic to the denial of the finite. In other words, the human being chooses to downplay or ignore all of the parts of himself that are outside of his control—his particular lived body, his unchosen national identity, his concrete personal history, his familial entanglements, and so on—in order to magnify his existential freedom to shape and determine his own identity. This rejection of actuality, the rejection of one's concrete situatedness, results for Kierkegaard in a profound existential discontinuity. The self, having rejected one side of the dialectic of existence, becomes lost in its imaginative power of self-interpretation, distanced from its concrete existential situation. In *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard examines this phenomenon under the guise of defiant despair, in *The Concept of Irony*, under the guise of romantic irony, and in *Either/Or*, through the character of Aesthete A. We will look briefly at these three examples in order to establish the existential illness to which Judge Wilhelm provides a possible remedy.

## 2.1 Defiant Despair

Though his nosology of spiritual ailments includes a variety of types of despair, we are concerned here with what Anti-Climacus calls "defiant despair." Defiant despair is the kind of wrong turn just described whereby the human being,

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the relationship between Kierkegaard's and Sartre's ideas on transcendence and facticity, see Pattison 1997, 80-84.

losing sight of the actuality that puts up resistance to his existential freedom, overemphasizes his freedom to create and interpret his own existence according to his whims and desires. Anti-Climacus describes this kind of despair as follows:

The self wants in despair to rule over himself, or create himself, make this self the self he wants to be, determine what he will have and what he will not have in his concrete self. His concrete self, or his concreteness, has indeed necessity and limits, is this quite definite thing, with these aptitudes, predispositions, etc., in this concrete set of circumstances, etc. But by means of the infinite form, the negative self, he wants first to refashion the whole thing in order to get out of it a self such as he wants, produced by means of the infinite form of the negative self—and it is in this way he wants to be himself.<sup>6</sup>

Thus the self in defiant despair rejects its concreteness and its finite situatedness while overemphasizing its powers of imaginative self-interpretation. The self wants to tell a new and original story about itself and wants to be able to retell this story at a moment's notice with fresh details. However, for Anti-Climacus, such an existential orientation results ultimately in a loss of existential continuity, for "just when [the self] seems on the point of having the building finished, at a whim it can dissolve the whole thing into nothing."<sup>7</sup> As K. Brian Söderquist puts it, such a self, whose narrative identity dissolves ultimately into a fiction, "is haunted by the possibility of starting all over again with a new interpretation."<sup>8</sup> In the end, like a stage actor for whom after many years the bounda-

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<sup>6</sup> *SUD*, 99.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>8</sup> K. Brian Söderquist, "Authoring a Self", *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2009), 153.

ries between self and role have disturbingly dissolved, the despairing self can no longer recognize the true from the fictional self-narrative. Such an individual, lacking even the semblance of internal continuity, becomes incomprehensible to himself, “an enigma” and mere mystification.<sup>9</sup> The despairing self’s given, concrete self has disappeared into its “fictional, masterly project, its own way of understanding itself.”<sup>10</sup>

## 2.2 The Romantic Ironist

In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard examines the same type of existential misalignment Anti-Climacus describes as defiant despair through an examination and critique of romantic irony.<sup>11</sup> In the doctoral thesis, alongside and through a sustained engagement with the thought of 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, Kierkegaard decries the German Romanticism fashionable at the time (exemplified by Schlegel, Tieck, and the like) for its ironic detachment from concrete, historical actuality:

As irony contrives to overcome historical actuality by making it hover, so irony itself has in turn become hovering. Its actuality is sheer possibility. In order for the acting individual to be able to fulfil his task in realizing actuality, he must feel himself assimilated into a larger context, must feel the seriousness of responsibility, must feel and respect every rational consequence. But irony is free from all this. It knows itself

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<sup>9</sup> *EO*, 47.

<sup>10</sup> *SUD*, 101.

<sup>11</sup> For a more nuanced analysis of these ideas as they appear in Kierkegaard’s dissertation, see K. Brian Söderquist’s *The Isolated Self: Truth and Untruth in Søren Kierkegaard’s On the Concept of Irony* (2007).

to be in possession of the power to begin from the beginning whenever it pleases, for nothing in the past is binding upon it.<sup>12</sup>

Just as the self in defiant despair, the romantic ironist wants to take full control of his own narrative identity, and thus denies the concrete facticity—his own historical actuality, his past—that would put up resistance to his own self-understanding. But in the end, the story such an ironist tells to himself about himself is unbelievable, for the ironist is always conscious of his ability to start all over again from the beginning at any point. The ties that bind the ironist to the finite are clipped, eliminating the limitations that actuality establishes in relation to self-narrative. Again, as Söderquist notes, the romantics “deny one side of the dialectic of human existence, the finite side that we share with everything in the natural world, while affirming our own power to transcend the finite via imagination.”<sup>13</sup> The Aesthete of *Either/Or* is guilty of the same, and it is to him that we will now turn before turning to the papers of his counterpart.

### 2.3 Aesthete A

Aesthete A, like his philosophical kindred spirits described above, holds at a distance from himself the actuality or facticity that could serve as the limiting horizons upon the infinitude of his existential freedom and upon his aesthetic self-interpretation; he denies the finite and the situated in favor of the infinite and the imaginative. Much of A’s papers are concerned with the phenomenon of memory, and with the accompanying phenomena of remembering and forgetting, and here his denial of actuality rears its head. A, like the despairing self of *Sickness unto Death*, “wants in its despair to savour to the full the satisfaction of making itself into itself, of developing

<sup>12</sup> *CI*, 296.

<sup>13</sup> Söderquist 2009, 156.



itself, of being itself.”<sup>14</sup> For this reason, he makes an art form of remembering and forgetting, whereby his factual history becomes an infinitely malleable fictional narrative that he can weave and reweave to fit his variable aesthetic disposition. For A, “one must...constantly vary oneself,”<sup>15</sup> but A is interested more in varying one’s own self-interpretation (“intensive” variation) than in varying one’s life situation (“extensive” variation), though the latter has an importance of its own.<sup>16</sup> On account of this aesthetic existential orientation, A hovers above himself, becomes a spectator to his own existence, loses any sense of textured factual connection to the shared intersubjective lifeworld or to his own given set of contingent, historical circumstances. In developing the art of remembering and forgetting, A thus also develops a way of living whereby he avoids ever being fully entrenched in or bound to his present experience, for to be fully present is to draw near to the world that A must hold at an infinite aesthetic distance from his self:

Being able to forget depends always on how one remembers, but how one remembers depends in turn on how one experiences reality...Every life-situation must possess no more importance than that one can forget it whenever one wants to; each single life situation should have enough importance, however, for one to be able at any time to remember it...Having perfected the art of forgetting and the art of remembering, one is then in a position to play battledore and shuttlecock with the whole of existence.<sup>17</sup>

## 2.4 Existential Misalignment

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<sup>14</sup> *SUD*, 101.

<sup>15</sup> *EO*, 239.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.



A, the self in defiant despair, and the romantic ironist all represent to various degrees a reoccurring Kierkegaardian theme: the existential chaos, incoherence, discontinuity, and misalignment that inevitably result from not properly attending to one's "given self,"<sup>18</sup> to the "larger context" into which one is thrown and from which one cannot extract one's self,<sup>19</sup> to the actuality, facticity, and the concrete reality that define one's situated existence as an embodied individual and delineate the limitations upon one's powers of self-interpretation. In his dissertation, Kierkegaard says of the ironist what could also be said of A or the despairing self: "Because the ironist poetically produces himself as well as his environment with the greatest possible poetic license, because he lives completely hypothetically and subjunctively, his life finally loses all continuity."<sup>20</sup> Loss of internal continuity is the inevitable outcome of the existential wrong turn I have outlined above. To follow Aesthete A in his denial of the demands of actuality, "to not merely think and speak aphoristically but live aphoristically,"<sup>21</sup> is to lose coherence or continuity as a self, for in this way one is not bound to any self-interpretation outside of the stories one tells oneself about oneself. And these stories are, in the final analysis, unbelievable, for the moment the story is told, the self "can dissolve the whole thing into nothing" and start again.<sup>22</sup>

We have thus shed light on the existential wrong turn by which the existing individual fails in the task of selfhood by denying one side of the dialectic of his existence: finitude. How then can one return from this existential wrong turn? For an answer to this question, we turn to the second part of *Either/Or* and to Wilhelm's papers.

### 3.0 The Papers of B

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<sup>18</sup> *SUD*, 99.

<sup>19</sup> *CI*, 296.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>21</sup> *EO*, 212.

<sup>22</sup> *SUD*, 101.

In his papers, Judge Wilhelm establishes his theory of ethical selfhood, a theory which attributes central importance to *choice*—specifically, to choosing oneself. For Wilhelm, selfhood begins in the act of ethical choice through which the individual chooses himself absolutely and thus takes responsibility for every element and aspect of his existence, the chosen and the contingent alike. Due to the brevity of this paper, I will not consider all of the dimensions of Wilhelm's account of ethical self-choice. Instead, I will focus here on Wilhelm's account of reconciliation with finitude and the existential continuity that results from this movement. Having ethically chosen oneself in one's "eternal validity,"<sup>23</sup> how does Wilhelm think the human being can become reconciled to the finite pole of her existence? Furthermore, how does such a reconciliation bring about an interior continuity that Wilhelm believes A lacks? What might self-interpretation look like in the wake of these existential movements?

### **3.1 Repentance into Finitude**

For Wilhelm, one essential element of ethical self-choice is the movement by which the individual takes responsibility not only for what he feels he has chosen, but also for all of those elements of his identity that he has not chosen and that he can neither control nor interpret away: his particular "aptitudes" and "passions," his body and his "definite surroundings."<sup>24</sup> The ethical individual "does not want to erase this concretion" that he himself is, but "sees in it [his] task."<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, by taking responsibility for his definite concreteness, for the chosen and the unchosen, for both poles of the dialectic of selfhood, the ethical individual takes hold of him-

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<sup>23</sup> *EO*, 516.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 542.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 545.

self as “a diversely determined concretion, and chooses himself therefore in respect of his concretion.”<sup>26</sup> One way that Wilhelm describes such a total and encompassing type of self-choice is through the idea of repentance:

[The ethical individual] repents himself back into himself, back into the family, back into the race, until he finds himself in God. Only on these terms can he choose himself and he wants no others, for only thus can he absolutely choose himself...it is only if I choose myself as guilty that I choose myself absolutely, if ever my choosing myself absolutely is not to be identical with creating myself.<sup>27</sup>

While there is certainly theological content to Wilhelm’s conception of repentance, this concept need not be *only* understood in traditional theological terms. Instead, repentance is the word Wilhelm uses to describe taking hold of oneself in all of one’s contingency and particularity, as “a diversely determined concretion,”<sup>28</sup> and refusing to leave anything out of the story. Although, in the end, we do receive our given selves “from the hand of the eternal God” according to Wilhelm’s account,<sup>29</sup> we start by simply choosing to be precisely who we are, where we are, in our messy and complex particularity.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 543.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 518.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 547.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 519.

<sup>30</sup> Söderquist notes in an analysis of *The Sickness unto Death* that, for Kierkegaard, “one might say that to be grounded in God comes very close to being grounded in God’s gift of situatedness” (Söderquist, 2013, p. 7). For Wilhelm, as well as for Anti-Climacus, reconciling oneself to one’s finitude and situatedness is inextricably bound up with reconciling oneself to the “power that established” the self (*SUD*, p. 44), the God from whom one receives oneself and one’s existential situation as a gift. Though I do not focus on this

Whereas A “looks at himself in his concretion and then distinguishes one thing from another,” seeing “one thing as belonging to him accidentally and another as belonging essentially,”<sup>31</sup> the ethical abolishes this distinction and takes responsibility for the entire given self precisely as it is given. This is why, for Wilhelm, one must choose oneself as “guilty,” because otherwise it is left to the individual to interpret away those parts of herself or her past for which she would rather not take up responsibility. As Agnes Heller puts it, if the individual who does not repentantly choose herself as guilty “at any time does something out of character, she can say that she has not chosen it. Yet if she repented back into all of her life contingencies she could never say that she did something because she was determined by this or that, because she has chosen all her contingencies freely.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, the category of guilt inaugurates the movement of repentance and dethrones the aesthetic or ironic individual’s selective self-interpretation, calling him to take hold of himself in his entirety, calling him to repent himself back into himself as this guilty, particular, existing individual.

Having chosen oneself repentantly under the category of guilt, having chosen oneself as “this definite individual, with these aptitudes, these tendencies, these instincts, these passions, influenced by these definite surroundings, as this definite product of a definite outside world,”<sup>33</sup> one comes into alignment with the finitude that delineates the boundaries of

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element of Wilhelm’s conception of selfhood here, and while I believe we can instructively read his papers apart from their “theological” implications, I view these implications as essential to a robust engagement with *Either/Or* and with Kierkegaard’s thought as a whole.

<sup>31</sup> *EO*, 550.

<sup>32</sup> Agnes Heller, “The Papers of B as the Modern Answer to both Aristotle and Kant,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2008), 9.

<sup>33</sup> *EO*, 542.

the stories one can tell about oneself. In choosing himself absolutely, the ethical individual brings the dialectical poles of his existence towards alignment by freely choosing his own contingency, his own history, his own situatedness, and he thereby “assumes responsibility for it all.”<sup>34</sup> The ethical individual “chooses himself as product; and this choice is freedom’s choice,”<sup>35</sup> for Wilhelm’s ethical freedom does not denote the aesthetic freedom to produce oneself, but the freedom to take up free responsibility for the produced self that one always already is. And it is precisely in this movement of reconciliation to finitude that one comes into “absolute continuity with the reality one belongs to.”<sup>36</sup>

### 3.2 Existential Continuity

Joakim Garff writes that “In his criticism of the Aesthete’s life, Wilhelm highlights repeatedly that he lacks any continuity in his existence, which consequently remains fragmentary and fails to transform itself into a genuine story.”<sup>37</sup> That ethical self-choice is the ground upon which one can establish an existential and narratological continuity is brought into relief when Wilhelm writes:

Only when one has taken possession of oneself in the choice, has attired oneself in one’s self, has penetrated oneself so totally that every movement is attended by the consciousness of a responsibility for oneself, only then has one chosen oneself ethically, only then has one repented oneself, only then is one concrete, only

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 542.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 543

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 541

<sup>37</sup> Joakim Garff, “A Matter of Mimesis: Kierkegaard and Ricœur on Narrative Identity,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2015), 312.

then is one, in one's total isolation, in absolute continuity with the reality one belongs to.<sup>38</sup>

Thus one's life is transformed into a "genuine story" when one stops trying to make up a new story, and chooses instead to take responsibility for every part of the story one has already lived—the story of which the self is indeed the "product."<sup>39</sup> Whereas the aesthetic individual looks back upon a disordered past in which his self dissolves "into a multitude,"<sup>40</sup> identifying himself essentially with this or that event but refusing to take responsibility for the whole, the ethical individual possesses "a history in which he acknowledges identity with himself" and through which he acknowledges that "he is only the one he is, with this history."<sup>41</sup> To imaginatively interpret away some element of this history, to pick and choose among the events of this history in order to wrest from it an idealized but incomplete self-narrative, is to do violence to the continuity by which the self is able to acknowledge "identity with himself."<sup>42</sup> The essential role of personal history in Wilhelm's account of selfhood is brought further into relief when he writes the following:

For the eternal dignity of man lies in the fact that he can acquire a history, and the divine element in him lies in the fact that he himself can impart to his history a continuity if he will; for it acquires that not by being the sum of all that has happened to or befallen me, but by being my own work, so that even what has befallen me is transformed in me and translated from necessity to freedom.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *EO*, 541.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 543.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 479.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 518.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 518.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 542.

Garff describes the idea latent in this passage this way: “To acquire one’s own history is the ‘deed,’ whereby one transfers the occurrences of one’s past from ‘necessity’ to ‘freedom.’ What formerly was the individual’s *history* becomes by this ‘deed’ the individual’s personal *narrative*.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, historical and narrative continuity is not something one attains simply by virtue of having a past, but is itself a product of human will; it is a product of the free choice by which the individual repentantly chooses oneself in one’s absolute particularity. This is why Garff notes further that “Human being is thus always *defined* by its history, but never utterly *determined* by it.”<sup>45</sup> Reconciling oneself to one’s finitude and thereby coming into continuity with one’s concrete reality does not mean that one is simply free from the work of self-interpretation, but it does mean that self-interpretation cannot be identical with self-creation. To move the dialectical poles of one’s existence towards alignment is not to magnify the finite to the detriment of the infinite, for this too is a kind of despair—the despair of lacking infinitude.<sup>46</sup> As Anti-Climacus notes, “to become something concrete is neither to become finite nor to become infinite, for that which is to become concrete is indeed a synthesis.”<sup>47</sup> Thus in the synthesizing movement of ethical self-choice, freedom remains, and self-interpretation with it, but ethical self-interpretation possesses responsibilities to its given actuality that aesthetic self-interpretation rejects.

### 3.3 Editorial Responsibility

Having chosen oneself as a “diversely determined concretion,”<sup>48</sup> having repented oneself back into oneself in all

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<sup>44</sup> Garff 2015, 312.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 313.

<sup>46</sup> *SUD*, 63-65.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>48</sup> *EO*, 543.



of one's finitude and contingency; having thereby come into alignment with actuality and established a free continuity with one's determinate history, Wilhelm is cognizant of the fact that the work of self-interpretation must go on. To recognize and take hold of one's finitude is not to abolish the narratological self-interpretation inextricably bound up with human reflexivity and self-consciousness (the infinite pole), but is to establish its limitations. The limitations within which self-interpretation thus takes place are the limitations of the given, factual context and the determinate history into which the self is always already thrown as the finite self that it is. Thus, for Wilhelm, the distinction between the accidental and the essential elements of one's given self

is not the product of whim, making it look as though [the ethical individual] had absolute power to make himself into whatever he wanted. For although the ethical individual might refer to himself as his own editor, he is at the same time fully aware of his editorial responsibility to himself, in so far as what he chooses has a decisive influence on him personally, to the scheme of things in which he lives, and to God.<sup>49</sup>

The idea of "editorial responsibility" establishes the decisive chasm between Wilhelm's conception of selfhood and that of defiant despair, the ironist, and the aesthete. For, as Garff puts it, "Being an editor is to intervene in an already existing text."<sup>50</sup> The self is then not its own creator, but the responsible editor of the concrete, given self that it is. A or the ironist would like "to begin a little earlier than other people, not at and with the beginning, but 'in the beginning,'" thus creating themselves as if they could get outside of life, as if they could step outside of themselves and mould themselves from a God-

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 551.

<sup>50</sup> Garff 2015, 314.

like vantage point.<sup>51</sup> Wilhelm, on the other hand, starts with the self as finite, as continuous with a particular history, as determined by a multitude of factors he cannot control, as thrown into a context he cannot escape, as “an individual who has these abilities, these passions, these inclinations, these habits subject to these external influences, and who is influenced thus in one direction and thus in another.”<sup>52</sup> And it is as this definite individual, as the ethical self who has chosen himself in all of his particularity, that the self undertakes the ongoing and infinitely demanding task of self-interpretation, fully aware of his ineluctable editorial responsibility to the concrete reality that partially defines him.

To borrow another authorial metaphor from Söderquist, “the person who is sensitive to facticity recognizes that he is not his own creator; he must indeed assist in telling a story about the self, but his role is that of a ‘co-author’ so to speak.”<sup>53</sup> The self is not its sole author, but writes within and alongside a text much of the contents of which are fixed by forces outside of the co-author’s control, but which the self nonetheless freely embraces and accepts, thus translating “necessity to freedom” and taking up responsibility even for what the self *qua* co-author did not choose to write.<sup>54</sup>

#### 4.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, Wilhelm provides in his papers one way to make sense of selfhood against the background of the existential misalignment that reappears at every stage of Kierkegaard’s authorship. The way towards this misalignment is the rejection of the finite; the way back is the reconciliation with that which has been rejected. However, it is important to

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<sup>51</sup> *SUD*, 99.

<sup>52</sup> *EO*, 552.

<sup>53</sup> Söderquist 2009, 158.

<sup>54</sup> *EO*, 542.

note that in lived experience, these stages are not always discrete and chronologically isolated. Indeed, the structure of *Either/Or* itself gestures to the possibility that the human subject is probably always caught up somewhere between these two dialectical stages, moving now in one direction and now in the other. And if Victor Eremita is right that the papers of A and B are "the work of one man" who has "lived through both kinds of experience" or has "deliberated on both,"<sup>55</sup> then these two existential movements tell the story of a single human self, and they thus have both existed or coexist within that self. Rejection of actuality is the condition of the reconciliation which B outlines, but this latter movement cannot be dogmatically secured against the former. Reconciliation with finitude remains vulnerable, porously open to the possibility of rejection, and Wilhelm's confident voice remains haunted by A's *Diapsalmata* that one could write like marginal notes along the edges of B's most triumphant turns of phrase. And perhaps, hidden from the reader's view, they are implicitly and invisibly scribbled there, whether scribbled by A or B it doesn't much matter. After all, they are probably one and the same.

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

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