

# Writing as a technology of the self in Kierkegaard and Foucault

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## Abstract

Writing is a very important means by which we can work on ourselves. Yet as a «technology of the self» writing has changed substantially at different times during European history. This essay sketches some of the crucial characteristics of writing as a technology of the self for Plato's contemporaries, for the early church fathers, and then for Peter Abelard. The changes exemplified in the confessional writing of Abelard became the platform for writing as a technology of the self in European modernism. The characteristics of modernist writing as a technology of the self are examined in some detail in the work of Kierkegaard, particularly with respect to his aesthetic writings and his use of multiple narrative voices. Kierkegaard's uses of writing are compared and contrasted with those of Baudelaire and Foucault.

**Key words:** Kierkegaard, Foucault, Abelard, writing, technologies of the self, transfiguration, Romanticism, modernism.

## Resum. *L'escriptura com a tecnologia del jo en Kierkegaard i Foucault*

Escriure és un important mitjà amb el qual podem actuar sobre nosaltres mateixos. Tanmateix, com a «tecnologia del jo», l'escriptura ha canviat substancialment en el temps durant la història europea. Aquest assaig esbossa algunes de les característiques més rellevants de l'escriptura com a tecnologia del jo per als contemporanis de Plató, per als primers pares de l'església i per a Pere Abelard. Els canvis exemplificats en l'escriptura confessional d'Abelard varen esdevenir la plataforma per a l'escriptura com una tecnologia del jo en la modernitat europea. Les característiques de l'escriptura de la modernitat en tant que tecnologia del jo són examinades amb cert detall en l'obra de Kierkegaard, particularment en relació amb els seus escrits estètics i el seu ús de múltiples veus narratives. Els usos Kierkegaardians de l'escriptura són comparats i contrastats amb els de Baudelaire i Foucault.

**Paraules clau:** Kierkegaard, Foucault, Abelard, escriptura, tecnologia del jo, transfiguració, Romanticisme, modernitat literària.

## Sumari

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## Introduction

Kierkegaard used writing for a variety of purposes: to communicate (indirectly); to explore (subjective) truth; to push discursive reason to its limits; to engage in «conversation» with the writings of philosophers, theologians and literary figures present and past. He also used writing as a technology for working upon himself. The use he made of this technology in working upon himself is significantly different from writing as a technology of the self in other eras. Its use shares substantial features with that of Baudelaire, and subsequently that of Michel Foucault. Kierkegaard's use of writing as a technology of the self also diverges significantly from that of Baudelaire and Foucault.

In this paper I will situate Kierkegaard's writing as a technology of the self by contrasting it with other significant uses in European history. But I will confine my remarks about Kierkegaard's writing mainly to his practices in *Either/Or*.

## Part I: Previous Uses of Writing as a Technology of the Self

### I. Plato's Greece

Plato's discussion in the *Phaedrus* is one of the earliest problematizations of writing in European philosophy. As Derrida's discussion in «Plato's Pharmacy»<sup>1</sup> has shown us, Plato's apparent privileging of speech over writing in this dialogue is not as straightforward as it seems. Derrida's strategy is to deconstruct the hierarchy Plato has established between speech and writing by exposing the ambiguity of the pivotal term «pharmakon».

Derrida seeks to make a general point about the relations between speech and writing, in pursuit of his critique of the metaphysics of presence. What he overlooks is the historical context of Plato's discussion. Why was Plato even concerned with the question of writing? Why did he problematize writing with respect to memory?

The answer is that Plato was responding polemically to a new use of writing which was much in vogue in contemporary Greek society. This was the use of *hypomnemata* or notebooks, both in personal life and in business and administration. As the name of these notebooks suggests, they were conceived primarily as a mnemonic aid. Civic officials, heads of households, merchants, etc., used notebooks to jot down ideas, appointments, things to be remembered. These notes then formed the raw data for reorganizing the enterprise, for improving management, for increasing efficiency or productivity. The raw data might come from ideas spontaneously occurring to the notetaker, or from things seen, heard, or read about.

1. Jacques Derrida, «Plato's Pharmacy» in *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson, University of Chicago Press, 1981: 61-171.

Much the same use was made of the notebooks in personal life. The private individual noted things he<sup>2</sup> thought worth remembering. These might simply be things that he needed or wanted to remember to do, or they might be ideas that would aid with selfmanagement. For example, if some observed behaviour were seen to be effective for the management of envy or greed or suffering, or to help someone be more energetic or happy, it could be noted in writing for future reference. The notebook then became a data bank which could be meditated on, organized, systematically reconstructed, so that it could form the basis of a program of self-management.

Self-mastery, by subordinating the unruly appetites to reason, was already a widespread aspiration among aristocratic Greek men. It was articulated strongly by Plato. For example, the *Phaedrus* contains an extended discussion of desire and erotic love, and the need to control these powerful forces with reason. To illustrate, Plato used the image of the soul as a chariot drawn by two horses: the horses are honour and appetite, the charioteer reason. Ethics in this context is largely a matter of prudential selfmanagement, using a hierarchical organization of faculties and drives. The manner of organization was modelled on the domestic economy, with reason in control.

To summarize, writing was used as a technology of the self in this context to serve the goal of self-mastery. Its relevant features for this purpose were that it acted as a memory bank, whose resources could be drawn upon as required. Furthermore, it rendered observations and memories in a form which allowed for their rational reorganization. Personal data in the memory bank could be used for self-transformation by modelling one's life on the rationally reconstructed writing. The aim of self-mastery was to augment pleasure, or to satisfy interests, at least insofar as these were compatible with an honourable life.

## II. Early Church Fathers

Many of the early church fathers also practised writing as a means of working on themselves. But there were significant differences between their use of writing and that of Plato's contemporaries. According to Foucault, the most significant difference was that the early church fathers used writing primarily as a means of *self-interpretation*<sup>3</sup>.

Christianity, for Foucault, is characterized by a «hermeneutics of suspicion» (the phrase is Paul Ricoeur's). Thoughts are not always what they seem to be: they often contain indirect evidence of sinful attitudes and satanic influences. The inner is not the outer. It is necessary to be vigilant with respect to one's innermost self, to see that it is not wandering off the true path to salvation. The technology of writing about oneself is aimed not at self-mastery for its own sake, but at purity so that one conforms to the word of God.

2. NB: The *hypomnemata* were used primarily by men.

3. Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: the History of Sexuality*, Volume 3, translated by Robert Hurley, Vintage, 1986: 239.

It is not a prudential self-management so that one attains a maximum of pleasure or satisfaction of interests, but a self-purification in order to purge oneself of the unholy and become closer to God.

Autobiographical writing at this time was primarily a means of confessing one's innermost thoughts, so as to expose them to objective scrutiny (whether another's, or one's own at another time, or God's). Greek writing about the self had confined itself to *phenomena* things as they appeared on the surface; thoughts observed, or acquired, or spontaneously occurring. These phenomena were then rearranged. But Christian writing was suspicious; it sought to delve beneath the surface appearances and uncover the innermost secrets of the self. It assumed the self was open to subtle deceptions. Only the most rigorous pursuit of truth, guided by the firmest religious faith could cut through the layers of deception.

This use of writing about the self was ultimately appropriated by the church in the practice of confession. Confession even became a compulsory annual practice for all parishioners by the decree of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. It formed a crucial stage in the development of a self who seeks its truth rather than a self who seeks to style itself.

An important additional feature of this early Christian confessional writing is that the subject's life is presented as an exemplar offered up to God. The *confessio*, as a form of writing, was always mediated by a relationship with God. In Augustine's *Confessions*, for example, the aim is to praise divine goodness and mercy rather than to reveal idiosyncratic episodes from the life of Augustine as a unique individual. Personal revelations are only made insofar as they relate to the fortunes of Christianity as a whole<sup>4</sup>. While suspicious self-scrutiny was set in train by this practice (in speech and in writing), its domain was restricted to spiritual self-scrutiny with respect to sinful, or potentially sinful, thoughts and behaviour<sup>5</sup>.

### III. Abelard's Autobiographical Writing

In his autobiography, *The History of My Calamities*, Peter Abelard made a substantial departure from this mode of confessional writing. Abelard wished to reveal himself as a unique individual whose biography could not be confused with anyone else's. He revelled in his idiosyncrasies. He revealed facts about his life which could not be socially approved.

4. Cf. N.F. Cantor, *Medieval History*, Macmillan, 1969: 363.

5. Cf. Augustine: «O Lord, my Helper and my Redeemer, I shall now tell and confess to the glory of your name how you released me from the fetters of lust which held me so tightly shackled and from my slavery to the things of this world»; Guibert of Nogent: «I confess to Thy Majesty, O God, my endless wanderings from Thy paths, and my turning back so often to the bosom of Thy Mercy, directed by Thee in spite of all. I confess the wickedness I did in childhood and in youth, wickedness that yet boils up in my mature years, and my ingrained love of crookedness, which still lives on in the sluggishness of my worn body.» Both quoted in Philip Barker, *Michel Foucault: subversions of the subject*, Allen & Unwin, 1994: 134-135.

Abelard's writing about himself can be distinguished from that of his predecessors in the following ways. There is no mediation by God; there is only the self-reflection of the writer. This self-reflection is used in a project of self-construction, like the Greek use of *hypomnemata*, but it is directed by a quest for the *truth* about himself rather than by prudential self-management. Abelard's ethics has as a theme, *know thyself*, so that his autobiography poses two questions: (I) Who is responsible for the life of the subject that I am? and (II) How did I become the subject that I am? Abelard sought to be perfectly honest about himself, in order that he appear as a transparent subject. This transparent subject was to be the foundation for his reasoning.

Rather than exercising a hermeneutics of suspicion, Abelard pursued a rigorous methodological scepticism. This raises a problem since the scepticism requires a grounding in a transparent subject, but if it is so grounded the scepticism evaporates. If there is no such grounding, then the subject of doubt itself becomes open to doubt, and madness threatens. Descartes was faced with the same problem, but evaded it by excluding by fiat the possibility of himself being mad<sup>6</sup>. Abelard adopted a similar solution, which, has become associated with the continued use of this methodological doubt, viz. he built a system. He created a world dominated by his own philosophical and methodological system, so that the inner/outer distinction collapsed and reality was made to agree with his individual subjective philosophical perspective<sup>7</sup>. But the whole system was potentially unstable due to the ambivalence between the opacity and transparency of the subject at its origin.

This is the point of departure I wish to take for a discussion of the use Kierkegaard makes of confessional writing as a technology of the self. Although the first volume of *Either/Or* is quite explicitly a critique of the self-constructive techniques of the German Romantics, it both draws on and undermines Abelard's autobiographical technology for creating the self-reflexive, transparent subject of reason.

## Part II: Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*

### I. *Ad se ipsum*

The first volume of *Either/Or* is presented as a collection of papers written by an aesthete. They have been published by the pseudonymous editor Victor Eremita, who has taken the liberty of using a phrase from two of the scraps of paper to serve as an epigraph for the first section of the volume. This phrase, *ad se ipsum* (to himself), might just as well have been used as an epi-

6. Cf. Michel Foucault's dispute with Derrida over the status of madness in Descartes *Meditations*. See Jacques Derrida, «Cogito and the History of Madness», in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978: 31-63; and Michel Foucault, «My Body, This Paper, This Fire», translated by Geoffrey Bennington, *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 4, 1979: 9-28.
7. Philip Barker, op. cit., 147.

graph to the whole volume. The writings of the aesthete are to himself, for himself.

The aesthete uses writing as a means of producing himself. He reflects on things in the world, and then reflects on his reflections. He jots down notes on bits of paper as they occur to him, perhaps to meditate on them later. In fact the phrase «ad se ipsum» is the Latin translation of the Greek title of Marcus Aurelius *Meditations*. In one of the *diapsalmata*, the aphoristic fragments which form the first section of the aesthete's papers, the aesthete adverts explicitly to the diary as an instrument for aiding memory: «If any man needs to keep a diary, I do, and that for the purpose of assisting my memory» (E O, I: 32). It seems at first glance, that we have a resurrection of the *hypomnemata* as a technology of the self.

But it is clear from the preface by Victor Eremita, and from numerous passages in the aesthete's own papers, that these writings also share features with the Christian tradition of hermeneutic suspicion. The very first line of Eremita's preface introduces the distinction between the internal and the external. When he notices contradictions between what he hears and what he sees in a person, he suspects inner secrets. The pursuit of these secrets is one of the passions of Eremita's life. He also uses the image of the confessional on the first page of his preface. But the priest in the confessional is not in a position to observe the telling contradictions which reveal concealed inwardness, since the priest only hears a voice. On the basis of the heard voice the priest «constructs an outward appearance which corresponds to the voice he hears» (E O, I: 3). In this way the confessing subject becomes «transparent» to the priest in the same manner as Abelard's self becomes «transparent» to himself - i.e. by building a system consistent with what is projected to be the true subject. This in effect collapses the inner/outer distinction, and hence any opportunity for doubting the coherence and transparency of that subject.

The aesthetic papers are all written in the first person. They appear to be confessional. Unlike those of the early church fathers, the aesthete's confessions are not mediated by God. They are more like Abelard's confessions in revealing even socially shocking things about the individual. But they are unlike Abelard's confessions in that they do not directly reveal *facts* about the individual. Rather, they reveal values, attitudes, and psychological perspectives. But they do more than this. The voice of the aesthete does not appear in monologue, as the only basis for constructing a picture of the aesthete. It is embedded within the editorial voice of Eremita, it is contrasted with the voice of Judge William (the ethicist of Volume 2), and even has other voices embedded within it (e.g. the voices of Johannes the seducer and his victim Cordelia).

It is this nesting of narrative voices within *Either/Or* which allows it to make a distinctive break as a technology of the self. Such a multiplication of narrative voices within a literary text was not new. In fact it was in vogue in the arabesque novel, characterized by Friedrich Schlegel as having fragmen-

tary form and a mixture of genres<sup>8</sup>. *Either/Or* is subtitled «A Fragment of Life». Its mixture of literary genres includes aphorisms, essays, letters, diaries, even a sermon. The arabesque novel was also frequently elided with the *Bildungsroman*, or novel of self-cultivation, where the protagonist's consciousness evolves with the narrative point of view.

But Kierkegaard made new use of these conventions. Like Plato, he took issue with a prevailing use of writing as a technology of the self. Kierkegaard's tactic was to redouble the technology in parody, then to bracket the aesthetic practice of self-writing in such a way as to expose its limitations. The parodic transgression of the limits of aesthetic self-writing, however, does not abolish the aesthete's strategies altogether. Rather, the aesthetic is *aufgehoben* (sublated) i.e. negated by being preserved in a higher sphere. In Kierkegaard's case, the aesthetic is to be sublated by being preserved as a transfiguring vision of reality, but operating within the context of an ethico-religious life.

Kierkegaard's tactic is to write the aesthetic point of view as if from the inside. Once the aesthetic self has been objectified in material artefacts, then the author can step back from it and appraise it. This is precisely how the slave manages to reverse the master/slave dialectic in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in the quest for selfrecognition. As a technology of the self, writing is here an objectification of oneself in the world which allows one to see oneself as if from the outside. The inner becomes outer - but in Kierkegaard's case, this is to allow one to become truly inner.

The first volume of *Either/Or* gives us a portrayal of aesthetic self-construction in the uses the aesthete, A, makes of his own writing. But the distance afforded by the multiplicity of narrative voices allows us as readers, and Kierkegaard as a writer, to make an existential evaluation of the aesthetic life.

## II. Romantic Irony

What are the characteristics of writing as a technology of the self for the aesthete - as presented in *Either/Or* Volume I? Since the aesthete is modelled on the German romantic ironist, we can expect a high degree of overlap in their uses of writing. As we shall see, Kierkegaard's critique of romantic irony also applies to the aesthete.

Writing for the aesthete is a space for spontaneous self-expression and play. This expression is governed by the mood of the moment —at least when writing aphorisms. No regard is paid to consistency or to an overall telos. Eremita even thinks the order of the aesthete's papers is arbitrary— they follow no apparent narrative plan.

While the aesthete has no overall telos, he does pursue limited goals. One of the main motivations for aesthetic action is to escape boredom. The aesthete

8. Friedrich Schlegel, «Letter About the Novel» in *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, translated by Ernst Behler and Roman Struc, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968: 94-105.

uses a combination of imagination and accident to «poeticize» the mundane. Irony, caprice, and reversal are tactics used to transfigure the actual world to render it interesting. For example, A says he knew a man «whose chatter certain circumstances made it necessary for me to listen to. At every opportunity he was ready with a little philosophical lecture, a very tiresome harangue. Almost in despair, I suddenly discovered that he perspired copiously when talking. I saw the pearls of sweat gather on his brow, unite to form a stream, glide down his nose in a drop-shaped body. From the moment of making this discovery, all was changed. I even took pleasure in inciting him to begin his philosophical instruction, merely to observe the perspiration on his brow and at the end of his nose» (*EO*, I: 295). Similar transfigurations through injections of arbitrariness can be achieved by seeing the middle of a play, or by reading the third part of a book.

Another tactic for escaping boredom, for the aesthete, is the «rotation method». This amounts to the prudential management of one's moods and desires, in a libidinal economy. This requires a certain degree of self-knowledge, so that one can predict when a desire will be satiated, when a particular mood needs to lie fallow, what succession of psychological states would be most titillating.

Aesthetic transfiguration of experience to escape boredom corresponds to the romantic ironist's aspiration to invest the mundane with infinite significance. This requires selective memory and forgetfulness. But this is not the same as the use of *hypomnemata* as a mnemonic aid. Memory and forgetfulness are conceived as Nietzsche later conceived them not as the brute presence or absence of sense impressions of the facts, but as the principles which organize our observations, and which preselect what we notice and overlook. In short, memory and forgetfulness are our principles of interpretation. It is by means of memory and forgetfulness that the aesthete poeticizes actuality.

Because the primary negative motivation for the aesthete is to escape boredom, the *interesting* is the primary positive motivation. The aesthete is a sensualist in the realm of reflection. While he adores im-mediate, i.e. unmediated, experience, he cannot attain it directly himself. Instead he has to enjoy im-mediate experience vicariously, or transfigured by his own poetic activity. In his unpublished work *De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, Kierkegaard (or his pseudonym Johannes Climacus) points out that etymologically the word «interest» breaks down into the Latin «inter» (between) and «esse» (being). Interest is therefore a being-between. Aesthetes and ironists throughout Kierkegaard's *oeuvre* are fascinated by young women. These are metaphors of immediacy-experiential virgins, unviolated by reflection. They are spontaneous, naive, and pure.

Language is glossed frequently in Kierkegaard's work as that which mediates between world and consciousness. The greater the linguistic reflectiveness, the greater the degree of mediation. The aesthete uses language to get between (*inter*) the being (*esse*) of the immediate. Language is the interesting. By prising apart the im-mediate given with language, the aesthete transfigures it.



A metaphor for the investment of the im-mediate with inter-est is tautology. The aesthete devote one of the *diapsalmata* to the topic: «Tautology is and remains still the supreme principle, the highest law of thought. What wonder then that most men use it? Nor is it so entirely empty that it may well serve to fill out an entire life» (*E O*, I: 37). That is, a tautology seems to be saying nothing at all, but just the repetition in language of the subject by the predicate is a mediation. It is an analogue of fictional language. Its meaning does not derive from reference to the actual world, but is produced by the interplay of signs within a language.

It is just this insertion of language into the self through the technology of writing, in an effort to invest im-mediate given experience with interest, that constitutes aesthetic self-creation. But this act of getting between experience to expand it into something inter-esting requires a starting point. That is why the aesthete needs an *occasion*. The spontaneous jottings in a diary, such as those found in the *diapsalmata*, can provide occasions for aesthetic expansion. A young woman, too, can be an occasion for the differential work of language (an idea explored at length in «Diary of the Seducer»).

The aesthete conceives of language and consciousness as systems of *dif-férance*<sup>9</sup>. It is only in naïve, spontaneous im-mediate that consciousness is present to its object. When language or reflection intervene, there is a deferral and displacement of both the subject and the object. There is only the interplay of signs. The subject is no longer transparent and self-present, but lost in a labyrinth of «unlimited semiosis». For the romantic ironists, this is infinitely interesting; for Kierkegaard, this is a condition of despair.

Kierkegaard had already criticized romantic irony as theorized and practised in the work of Fichte, Friedrich Schlegel, Tieck and Solger in *The Concept of Irony*. The main thrust of the critique is that romantic irony loses touch with actuality. It turns everything into a poetic dream. For example, in Tieck, «Animals talk like human beings, human beings talk like asses, chairs and tables become conscious of their meaning in existence, human beings find existence meaningless. Nothing becomes everything, and everything becomes nothing; everything is possible, even the impossible; everything is probable, even the improbable» (*Cl*, 318).

The main characteristic of this form of aestheticism is that it transfigures actuality, but in such a way that it loses touch with actuality. Kierkegaard wants to retain the transfiguration of everyday life by means of an inward infinity, but he wants to reject the extreme subjective idealism of romantic irony.

9. Cf. Jacques Derrida, «Differance» in *Speech and Phenomena And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, translated by David B. Allison, Northwestern University Press, 1973: 129-160.

### III. Kierkegaard's Modernism

The solution Kierkegaard has to the problems of aesthetic self-writing has a lot in common with the model of modernism proposed by Baudelaire in his figure of the dandy. This in turn was used by Foucault as a model for using writing as a technology in the pursuit of individual freedom. All three depart from romantic irony in requiring the transfiguration of actuality to be complemented with an exacting respect for actuality. In fact, all three require the transfiguration to occur by simultaneously respecting and transgressing actuality. All three engage in a relentless Socratic interrogation of given actuality in pursuit of an *ethic* of truthfulness. This uncompromising pursuit of truth, no matter how dangerous the social context, is what Foucault dubbed *parrhêsia*. In all three cases truth is not straightforwardly a matter of correspondence, nor language simply representational. Truthfulness is performative, and transgressive uses of language create the conditions for new experiences of actuality.

According to Kierkegaard's analysis in *The Concept of Irony*, Socratic irony is the midwife at the birth of subjectivity. That is, Socrates' unremitting interrogation and ironic subversion distanced his interlocutors from all received opinion and given actuality. This resulted initially in *aporia*, a state of utter bewilderment and disorientation. Ultimately it forced each individual to take responsibility for their own thoughts and actions. They could no longer rely on what they had learned from tradition or from their peers. Each individual had to become responsible for themselves in the face of truth Socrates did not allow them to turn away in bad faith and forgetfulness.

Romantic irony also distances the individual from received opinion and given actuality. But this distancing is performed by the ironist on him or herself. There is no *other* voice to perform the deconstruction or ironic subversion of one's bad faith. Socratic irony was always performed by another upon the subject. Romantic irony is autodidactic, and like Abelard's doubting subject threatens to become purely subjective. It is not that romantic irony fails to have a multiplicity of narrative voices, but these are not used to gain critical perspective on one another. They do not allow us to experience each voice as a «limited whole» to use Wittgenstein's expression. From within the perspective of romantic irony we cannot redraw the limits of the world of romantic irony.

The modernist tactic is to use multiple voices within the text. In modernism literature emerges as self-reflexive writing that folds back on itself to create a virtual space of meaning. Within this space characters can comment on themselves and on one another at a critical distance. Foucault cites Cervantes' *Don Quixote* as one of the earliest instances of this form of writing, where language is no longer simply continuous with «the great chain of being», nor transparently representational of the actual<sup>10</sup>. This can be used as a technology for

10. Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: an archaeology of the human sciences*, translator unnamed, Tavistock, 1970.

working on oneself, but has various potential outcomes. One possible outcome is to lose oneself in the *mise en abîme* of language and to lose touch with actuality (as does subjective idealism, romantic irony, and the nihilistic relativism of some forms of postmodernism and neo-pragmatism). Another possible outcome is to use the virtual space of Literature as a realm for experimentation, self-objectification, and testing of the limits of language (critique).

It is by means of a combination of poetic transfiguration and critique that Kierkegaard, Baudelaire and Foucault work on themselves through Literature. Here is how Foucault characterizes the project of modernity: «For the attitude of modernity, the high value of the present is indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping it in what it is. Baudelairean modernity is an exercise in which extreme attention to what is real is confronted with the practice of a liberty that simultaneously respects this reality and violates it<sup>11</sup>.

But this is very close to Kierkegaard's notion that the aesthetic relation to actuality must be preserved within the context of an ethico-religious life. The pitfalls of romantic aestheticism must be avoided, but the positive values of irony and poetic transfiguration must be preserved. This is achieved when the poetic transfiguration is accomplished by means of «extreme attention to what is real». As it happens, the Danish word for transfiguration (*Forklarelse*) also means «clarification».

The poetic transfiguration of actuality (given reality) is achieved by becoming clear about its limits, then transgressing them in such a way that those limits are both exceeded and preserved. In Literature this is achieved by writing the self from the point of view of contemporary consciousness, then enfolding that point of view in another which exceeds it. Kierkegaard portrays the aestheticism of the romantics, then exceeds it with the point of view of the ethicist (and later the religious point of view). Foucault explores in minute detail the epistemic conditions for the production of knowledge in the renaissance, and exceeds it with a description of the epistemic conditions in the classical age (and later the modern age).

#### IV. Differences Between Kierkegaard's Writing As A Technology of the Self and Foucault's

Kierkegaard retained the idea from the church fathers that all self-writing be mediated by God. Foucault the atheist repudiated any such idea. For Kierkegaard «the art of existing is a skill that must be acquired and cultivated via a relation to the infinite, rather than performed simply on the basis of natural talents and

11. Michel Foucault, «What Is Enlightenment?» in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, Penguin, 1984: 41.

capacities in life»<sup>12</sup>. Kierkegaard, at least retrospectively, regarded his whole «authorship» as having been written under divine «governance» (*Styrelse*)<sup>13</sup>.

Very early in his writing career Kierkegaard identified two characteristics he thought essential to the novel writer. In *From the Papers of One Still Living*, his critique of H.C. Andersen, he claims that a *Romandigter* (literally, a poet of novels) needs to have a «life-development» (*Livs-Udvikling*) and a «life-view» (*Livs-Anskuelse*). Life-development is an «epic stage» in life which involves action and heroic striving toward a single goal. In his own case Kierkegaard sought an idea for which he could live and die. This single-minded purpose is what differentiates the writer with a life-development from the «lyrical stage of elegaic moodiness» which Kierkegaard attributes to Andersen. It is this single goal in life which allows the writer to form a positive relation to actuality, and which allows the writer to avoid identifying so closely with the characters he or she creates that their own personality becomes lost in the poetic productions<sup>14</sup>.

A life-view, for Kierkegaard, «involves a “transubstantiation” or inward transformation of experience so as to gain “an unshakable certainty in oneself”, regardless of whether the life-view is oriented in a worldly manner within a purely human context or more deeply within a religious one. A life-view thus provides a comprehensive center of orientation that enables one to take a firm, positive stance toward life, with a sense of self-confidence in meeting the challenges of life rather than being overcome by them»<sup>15</sup>.

It looks as though the life-development and life-view must *precede* poetic activity. But it is clear that Kierkegaard thinks these evolve in the process of writing and can only ever be approximated. They become clearer in retrospect<sup>16</sup>.

But the idea of a preformed life-development and life-view, or of a preformed core around which fuller versions evolve, is anathema to Foucault. So too is the idea that one's whole life's strivings should be oriented by a single goal. At most Foucault might agree that the self which is shaped by writing a single work can be oriented by a particular idea. But to stick with it for one's whole life would be obsessive. The whole point of writing for Foucault, is to transform the self:

There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks and perceive differently than one sees is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all. People will say, perhaps, that these games with oneself would better be left backstage; or at best, that they might form part of those preliminary exercises that are forgotten once they have served their pur-

12. Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994: 19.

13. Soren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author: a Report to History*, translated by Walter Lowrie, Harper & Row, 1962.

14. Cf. Sylvia Walsh, op. cit., 35.

15. Ibid., 37.

16. Ibid., 37.

pose. But, then, what is philosophy today —philosophical activity, I mean— if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself? In what does it consist, if not in the endeavour to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known?<sup>17</sup>

Yet there are hints in Foucault's later work that retrospective recuperations of his life's writings had been oriented by the Kierkegaardian and Nietzschean principles to «become who he was».

### Conclusion

Kierkegaard's use of writing to work upon himself is continuous with aesthetic selfwriting insofar as it helps to transfigure given actuality (the appearance of the world we have inherited). But this is not a licence to create the world *ex nihilo*. We are constrained by the way the world is taken to be. Our first task (the ethical) is to acknowledge these limits; our second task (the religious) is to transfigure our epistemic limits or the limits of the «universal» in Kierkegaard's terminology. Within the shifting, relativistic world of interaction between subject and object, Kierkegaard thinks we need a constant to orient our transgressive inventions. This he finds in the single life goal and in the practice of faith.

17. Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, translated by Robert Hurley, Vintage, 1985: 8-9.