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Kierkegaard's uncertain language

In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard discusses those terrible stories in which the hero bravely or loyally or modestly keeps a secret, and disaster unfolds. Hiddenness, he says, is *aesthetically* justified – but the *ethical* is always disclosure. The literary is a place where the secret can be held (whatever the consequences, we might want to scream at the hero – but he's still the hero). On the contrary in life we must reveal our secrets – disclose them in language. In *Fear and Trembling* the principle appears to be that faith is just what is beyond these two categories: hiddenness paradoxically beyond disclosure. But it is uncertain that we can get *to* ethics, let alone beyond it.

In this paper I will explore the way in which Kierkegaard's division between aesthetical hiddenness and ethical disclosure is undermined by Saussure's insights, specifically as they have been developed in critical theory: I will draw on Paul de Man's essay "The Resistance to Theory". If we can't delimit the aesthetic in such a way that it doesn't contaminate the language we are obliged to use in ethical disclosure, then the ethical task is in real trouble.

"By considering language as a system of signs and of signification rather than as an established pattern of meanings, one displaces or even suspends the traditional barriers between literary and presumably non-literary uses of language..." (de Man 9)

But Kierkegaard himself is not a thinker unfamiliar with uncertainty: he writes without authority (even without name), writes of paradox, and those readers who are most certain of their reading are those offended. If critical theory can challenge the sedimentation of the "stages" (aesthetic, ethical, faith), Kierkegaard's work will itself prove particularly fertile for this kind of exploration. Reading Keats, Paul de Man traces the uncertainty of the reader back to that of the author:

One could hardly expect to find solace in this "fearful symmetry" between the author's and the reader's plight since, at this point, the symmetry is no longer a formal but an actual trap, and the question no longer "merely" theoretical (17).

Who better than Kierkegaard to respond to, and provide ground for reading, this symmetry between author's plight and reader's, to this movement of the problem out of the theoretical and into the existential?