HOW TO READ KIERKEGAARD

John D. Caputo

KIERKEGAARD

JOHN D. CAPUTO

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To Ed and Marcia
Fellow Travellers

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How am I to read *How to Read*?

This series is based on a very simple, but novel idea. Most beginners' guides to great thinkers and writers offer either potted biographies or condensed summaries of their major works, or perhaps even both. *How to Read*, by contrast, brings the reader face-to-face with the writing itself in the company of an expert guide. Its starting point is that in order to get close to what a writer is all about, you have to get close to the words they actually use and be shown how to read those words.

Every book in the series is in a way a masterclass in reading. Each author has selected ten or so short extracts from a writer's work and looks at them in detail as a way of revealing their central ideas and thereby opening doors on to a whole world of thought. Sometimes these extracts are arranged chronologically to give a sense of a thinker's development over time, sometimes not. The books are not merely compilations of a thinker's most famous passages, their 'greatest hits', but rather they offer a series of clues or keys that will enable readers to go on and make discoveries of their own. In addition to the texts and readings, each book provides a short biographical chronology and suggestions for further reading,

Internet resources, and so on. The books in the *How to Read* series don't claim to tell you all you need to know about Freud, Nietzsche and Darwin, or indeed Shakespeare and the Marquis de Sade, but they do offer the best starting point for further exploration.

Unlike the available second-hand versions of the minds that have shaped our intellectual, cultural, religious, political and scientific landscape, *How to Read* offers a refreshing set of first-hand encounters with those minds. Our hope is that these books will, by turn, instruct, intrigue, embolden, encourage and delight.

Simon Critchley
New School for Social Research, New York

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INTRODUCTION

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813–55) first achieved fame in the relative obscurity of Copenhagen, in the mid-nineteenth century a city of about 125,000 people. His reputation was propelled far beyond tiny Denmark by early twentieth-century German translations of his writings, which influenced Karl Barth and Martin Heidegger. They in turn mediated him to the 'French Existentialists', Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir, where his radical Christianity was given an atheistic twist in the 1940s. A decade earlier the Oxford University Press editor Charles Williams (along with C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, a member of 'The Inklings', a well known circle of Oxford literary luminaries) initiated the English translation, later collaborating with the engaging translations being done at Princeton University Press. By the 1950s, popular expositions of 'Kierkegaard – the Father of Existentialism' abounded. Kierkegaard had made it into highbrow culture, a fit subject for Woody Allen jokes about *Angst* (one of Kierkegaard's most well known ideas), and a permanent part of the canon.

Kierkegaard himself has proven an endlessly fascinating subject, as Joakim Garff's voluminous *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography* (2000) amply attests. Raised on one of Copenhagen's most elegant squares, his prosperous family was presided over by a strict father, Michael Pederson Kierkegaard. The father,

whose lively intelligence and business acumen were matched only by the depth of his religious torments, was the constant childhood companion of his son Søren. In part the result of his intense and dominating father, and in part the result of his excessive powers of introspection, Kierkegaard would never quite fit into the world. The right to be an 'exception to the universal' would be a central theme of his work.

Except for occasional trips to the northern coast or to Berlin, Kierkegaard spent his entire life in Copenhagen. He would interrupt his long work day for expensive carriage rides in the countryside, or a walk about the town, recording acute observations of the fashions and foibles of the busy city. He lived in what has been called Denmark's Golden Age: he was a contemporary (both a critic and a rival) of Hans Christian Andersen, in a city that was the home of the royal family and of a lively aristocratic intellectual elite. Kierkegaard's inner torments consumed him but they were also the raw material for his extended studies of the human spirit. A generous paternal inheritance (£200,000) freed him for a lifelong sabbatical as an independent writer and he turned out a staggering number of pages before he died at the early age of 42.

Kierkegaard's life and work turned on three crises. The first twist took place in 1841 when he broke his engagement with Regine Olsen, a woman ten years his junior, because he said that 'God had lodged a veto'.[1] It would be wrong to allow his melancholy and gloomy spirit to darken her radiant youth and beauty. But he was also protecting the privacy he required as a writer. An astonishing flood of books, some of Europe's greatest works of philosophy, written under a dozen different pseudonyms, poured out in the next four years. In these works he forged the concept of 'subjective' or 'existential truth', which meant truth as a passionate mode of personal

existence, the sort of truth one lives and dies for, and the notion of the 'single individual', of the self as a unique and irreplaceable person, not simply an interchangeable member of a species. The elaboration of these two ideas was Kierkegaard's most fundamental contribution to philosophy.

His predecessors in this regard were Augustine, Pascal and Luther, who were the first ones to describe the scene to which Kierkegaard always returned – the personal self standing alone before God (*coram deo*), its eternal fate hanging in the balance. Kierkegaard brought this tradition to a head by defining the idea of religious 'subjectivity' and giving it its sharpest and most enduring formulations. To be a self for Kierkegaard means to live in the white light of eternity, where there is no deceiving God. This stands in sharp contrast with Plato and Aristotle, where the individual is an instance of a kind, a specimen of a species, a 'case' (from *cadere,* to fall) that 'falls under' the universal or the species. For Kierkegaard, the individual is not a fall but a peak, not peripheral but a secret centre, a principle of freedom and personal responsibility. Kierkegaard draws a portrait of the individual, full of 'fear and trembling' about its eternal destiny, deeply conscious of its solitude, finitude and fallibility. It is in this religious soil that the secular philosophical movement called 'Existentialism' and its famous 'existential self' has its roots, as does the characteristically postmodern idea of 'singularity', of the unrepeatable and idiosyncratic character of each and every thing – from the individual person to the work of art. While Kierkegaard's own emphasis fell upon the need for assuming personal responsibility and the need to put one's beliefs into practice, critics of Existentialism worry about relativism, about making the truth a matter of individual preferences and undermining an order of objective truth. The same concern with relativism

is what troubles contemporary critics of postmodernism, a theory of radical pluralism that celebrates the multiplicity of points of view, and a line of thinking that Kierkegaard clearly anticipates in many ways.

The second turning point in his work occurred in 1846. He claimed his literary calling was 'concluded' and he resolved to take a job as a pastor (he had a Master's degree in theology and had done some seminary training). But he proceeded to provoke a fight with a popular Danish weekly *The Corsair*, which mercilessly lampooned him in return, publishing cartoons of Kierkegaard as an odd-looking hunchbacked creature with uneven trouser legs, caricatures that are reproduced even today. Kierkegaard conveniently concluded that if he quit his life as an author Copenhagen's high society would think he had been driven to a parsonage by a gossip-mongering paper. God was now vetoing his plans for the parsonage. A second series of works resulted over the next seven years, almost all signed in his own name and unmistakably religious in character, launched by a prescient analysis of the 'levelling' effects of the press, the first modern mass means of communication. His cultural critique also converged with much of what Nietzsche would say forty years later writing about the 'death of God'. These two geniuses of the nineteenth century, the one Christian and the other the author of a book entitled *The Anti-Christ*, are the twin prophets of contemporary life and critics of the emerging bourgeois culture. They are the subject of constant comparisons.

The third crisis came in 1854 with the death of Jacob Mynster, the bishop and primate of the Danish Church and an old family friend. All along Kierkegaard had been cultivating a radical concept of Christianity that pitted authentic 'Christianity' against the worldliness of 'Christendom', namely, the comfortable Christian bourgeois class of modern Europe.

The ecclesiastical leaders of the day rightly suspected that they were the ultimate targets of this distinction and took umbrage at Kierkegaard's call to introduce 'Christianity' into Denmark. After Mynster's death, Kierkegaard launched a personal attack on the clergy and on all 'Christendom'. While much of Kierkegaard's pillorying of the clergy was on target these works also reveal a darker side of his nature, which would lead him finally to declare marriage and sexual desire 'criminal'. Holding up his own celibacy and solitude as the norm, he declared marriage the exception, that is, a compromise embraced by the fallen flesh in order not to burn, as St Paul famously said. His short and controversial life ended on this polemical note in 1855.

The books Kierkegaard left behind are a dazzling legacy, but the question of how to read them is complex. He is a deep but perplexing religious author. On the one hand (what he himself called his *right* hand)[2] we find a steady flow of overtly religious treatises recommending the imitation of Christ. About as far from Camus and Sartre as one could get, these 'edifying' meditations would have remained the works of a local religious genius were it not for what he called the works of the *left* hand. These were the books signed by the colourful patchwork of pseudonyms, such as Johannes Climacus and Johannes de Silentio, and among them are the masterpieces of European philosophy upon which his reputation rests. If his name appears at all there, it is as the 'editor' or the one 'responsible for publication'. His most radical postmodern readers, approaching him in the wake of Derrida and deconstruction, tell us that the works of the left hand are a sophisticated joke, and if we take the pseudonyms seriously the joke is on us.

But if Kierkegaard is a kind of poet, an ironist and a

humorist these were roles he assumed as a strategy and as a method of communication. He made an unambiguous philosophical critique of the futility of soaring metaphysical speculation, substituting for it an acute and subtle description of concrete human experience, of what he liked to call the life of the 'poor existing individual'. This argument was accompanied by an increasingly austere religious view that is detectable in the pseudonyms and increasingly prominent in the books he signed in his own name. He used pseudonyms not because he was a sceptic but because he regarded the author as a matter of 'indifference', for what is said in these books has nothing to do with whether the author wears a hat (or has uneven trouser legs). As the author, he argued, he himself is nobody, as good as dead, infinitely light relative to the gravity of the reader's existential fate. What matters is the dance, the dialectical play of ideal possibilities into which the reader is to be personally drawn. The books are but occasions for readers to be induced, even seduced, into making a decision for themselves.

This is not the 'infinite irony'[3] of a prankster but *existential irony*, indeed, finally, it is *Christian irony*, the irony of a man who sought a way to excite Christian passion in his readers without interposing himself between the individual and God and without posing as an authority or as a personally worthy representative of Christian life. The uncertain effect produced by the pseudonyms educes a decisive existential movement on the part of the reader. Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous author of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, does not himself claim to be a Christian but says that here at least is what it would mean to become one. If he was uncertain whether he or anyone one else met the standard, he had no uncertainty about the standard, which is the 'imitation of Christ', which

was also the title of the famous book by Thomas à Kempis that was one of his favourite works of devotion.

Kierkegaard's irony and humour represent a striking stylistic innovation in the history of philosophy, and they unmistakably mark off an author who is offering something different from the usual fare. But more than that, they were enlisted in the service of a deadly serious and age-old religious project that would change the direction of western philosophy and theology after him.

1

THE TRUTH THAT IS TRUE FOR ME

What I really need is to be clear about *what I am to do*, not what I must know, except in the way knowledge must precede all action. It is a question of understanding my destiny, of seeing what the Deity really wants *me* to do; the thing is to find a truth which is truth *for me*, to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*. And what use would it be if I were to discover a so-called objective truth, or if I worked my way through the philosophers' systems and were able to call them all to account on request, point out inconsistencies in every single circle? And what use here would it be to be able to work out a theory of the state, and put all the pieces from so many places into one whole, construct a world which, again, I myself did not inhabit but merely held up for others to see? What use would it be to be able to propound the meaning of Christianity, to explain many separate facts, if it had no deeper meaning *for me and for my life?* Certainly I won't deny that I still accept an *imperative of knowledge*, and that one can also be influenced by it, but *then it must be taken up alive in me*, and *this* is what I now see as the main point . . . But to find that idea, or more properly to find myself, it is no

> use my plunging still further into the world . . . That's what I lacked for leading a *completely human life* and not just a life of *knowledge*, to avoid basing my mind's development on – yes, on something that people call objective – something which at any rate isn't my own, and base it instead on something which is bound up with the deepest roots of my existence, through which I am as it were grown into the divine and cling fast to it even though the whole world falls apart. *This, you see, is what I need, and this is what I strive for* . . . It is this inward action of man, this God-side of man, that matters, not a mass of information . . . Vainly have I sought an anchorage, not just in the depths of knowledge, but in the bottomless sea of pleasure . . . What did I find? Not my 'I', for that is what I was trying in that way to find . . . One must first learn to know oneself before knowing anything else (*gnothi seauton*) . . . In association with the ordinary run of men I have had but little to win or to lose . . . My companions have with few exceptions exerted no marked influence on me . . . So I am standing once more at the point where I must begin in another way. I shall now try to look calmly at myself and begin to act inwardly; for only in this way will I be able . . . to call myself 'I' in a profounder sense . . . So let the die be cast – I am crossing the Rubicon. This road no doubt leads me into *battle*, but I will not give up.
>
> (*Papers and Journals*, Gilleleie, 1 August, 1835)[4]

Kierkegaard had just turned twenty-two when he made this entry in his journals, which he had begun keeping a year earlier. On vacation on the northern coast, this entry in particular stands out for its striking expression of his life journey, giving words to his 'existential search' – the search of a passionate and inward individual – for the 'truth that is true for me'. The wild oats

he alludes to sowing (the 'bottomless sea of pleasure') were wild only by the austere standards of his father and elder brother Peter, from whom he was then trying to twist free. He had been treating his academic duties lightly and, judging from an ambiguous entry elsewhere in the journals, he may also have had a sexual encounter with a prostitute (if so, possibly his sole sexual experience ever). This extract, much more polished and dramatic than others of the period, makes it into all the anthologies.

The entry introduces his core idea of 'subjective' or 'existential' truth later expounded by the pseudonyms. In a note penned in the margin of this journal entry he adds that 'the genuine philosopher is in the highest degree' – not 'objective' but – 'sub-object-ive' (38). He puts a distance between himself and 'objective' truth or the 'systems' of the philosophers. The idea is not relativistic. He is not saying that anything that comes into an individual's head will do for the truth so long as the individual has taken a fancy to it, or that a real philosopher is exonerated from the demands of unbiased investigation. His target was instead an excessive intellectualism that centred around the dominant Hegelian philosophy of the day and that he sensed was growing up all around him, draining the cultural life out of Europe and sponging up its vitality. Half a century later, Nietzsche, speaking from a distinctly anti-religious point of view, would make the same point. The excessive preoccupation with historical inquiry, the young Nietzsche complained, was turning Europeans into spectators of life, not players in its high stakes game. Kierkegaard had gleaned the same point from his father, for whom Christianity was a matter of the heart, not of learning or scholarly debate.

The son never wavered on his father's idea about a heartfelt

faith. The 'meaning of Christianity' is its meaning 'for myself and for *my life*', not a body of creedal assertions, not the doctrinal definitions propounded by the theologians. Kierkegaard argued in particular against what was happening to Christianity in the university, where the philosophy of Hegel held sway. Hegel, the greatest of the German metaphysicians and arguably the greatest philosopher of the nineteenth century, proposed a comprehensive and systematic account of all reality, perhaps the last philosopher to actually undertake such a project. Hegel held that God was not a transcendent being in a separate sphere beyond space and time, but rather more like a world-soul, a spirit whose life unfolded in the immanence of space and time. History, Hegel said, is God's autobiography, the way the divine life develops in time, of which the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is a symbol. Christianity for Hegel was part of the System. Hegel treated Christian doctrines as an 'imaginative representation' (*Vorstellung*) or symbol of what the philosophers could explain more clearly by means of conceptual analysis, something like a lovely picture postcard of the philosopher's colder, more analytic truth. For Kierkegaard this was a dreadful compromise of God's transcendence and majesty. The pseudonym Johannes Climacus – the name is taken from a seventh-century monk and author of an ascetic treatise *The Ladder to Paradise* – would later quip that on Hegel's accounting, God came into the world to seek an explanation of himself from German metaphysics.

Kierkegaard argued against Hegel by pitting Christianity as a personally transforming faith against a Christianity reduced to a moment in Hegel's system. He did this by proposing an alternate ladder of the soul to God that begins in aesthetic experience, undergoes an ethical awakening, and finally peaks –

right where his father would place it – in the passionate movements of religious faith, where it displaces what Hegel called 'speculative philosophy'. Those famous 'three stages of existence' are not to be taken as sequential but as ideally held together in the tensions of a single personality, where the ethical tempers the aesthetic below and yields to the direction of the religious above.

'The truth that is true for me' does not mean arbitrariness or caprice, believing anything one likes. It signifies inner resolve, where the 'for me' – an expression, he says, he first found in Luther – means the truth that personally transforms my life. The opposite of 'true for me' is a lifeless truth, pure lip service, evading the demands of life with empty words. Seek first the Kingdom of God: that is, the first order of business is to transform one's own inner life, not the accumulation of external trappings of speculative knowledge. The truth of Christianity is not to supply raw material for the reflections of German metaphysics; no more than it is to be relegated to Sunday morning piety and ignored the rest of the week. If Christianity is 'true' it is true in the sense that the Scriptures speak of when it is said of Jesus that he is 'the way, the truth and the life', meaning that its truth is a way of a living in the truth. If you do not have in your heart the love of your neighbour of which the New Testament speaks; if you are not loving and forgiving in your life; if you do not inscribe this love into your personal existence, then you are not 'in the truth' in the 'existential' sense. The journal entry opens up a new theory of truth, which moves beyond the classical intellectualist definition of the correspondence of a mental representation with an object out there in the world. Truth is redescribed in the personal terms to be found previously in Augustine and the Franciscan tradition.

We should observe that, contrary to his critics, Kierkegaard does not disdain the 'imperative of knowledge'; he only warns us about what happens if objective thinking acquires ascendancy. Far from discrediting science (he actually showed an early interest in science), to say that objective truth must come alive in me as a personal passion is in fact a good start for a philosophy of science. Kierkegaard here anticipates the contemporary critique of value-free science as a 'myth of objectivity', which reminds us that scientists are people with personal passions and perspectives. We rightly worry about the too great prestige of a 'science' that tries to pass itself off as if it dropped from the sky. We rightly demand personal and ethical accountability from scientists, even as we honour the humanitarian passion of many great scientists. Personal knowledge must precede impersonal knowledge.

On one level, what he is saying is uncontroversial. Knowledge should provide the basis of action and be translated into action; theory must be put into practice or else it is lifeless. But the more interesting version of the claim is made under his pseudonyms, that the most important subjective truths can never be achieved by objective means or be given independent objective status. They emerge only from passionate subjectivity. As St Augustine said, there are certain things we can learn only if we love what we are seeking to learn about. The real meaning of saying 'God is love' is forged and acquired in subjective life; its real meaning is what it means in my life. Any objective facts of the matter about 'Christianity' touch only the surface of Christianity. Christianity is not a body of propositions, but a way one's 'existence', one's personal life, must be transformed.

We might be tempted to think that the sort of thing that Kierkegaard is writing about here, finding one's personal truth,

while very important, is better kept in his journals and does not make for a work of philosophy. Can there be an existential *theory*? Can there be an *objective* presentation of the truth that is true for me? It is one thing to tell yourself this sort of thing in a journal, but quite another to write books about subjective truth. How do you write a book that tells the reader to find the truth for themselves and not to find it in a book? Would not such a book contradict itself just by being written? Kierkegaard's first strategy in dealing with this problem would be to attribute the 'theory' to a pseudonym.

In the next century, under the impulse of Kierkegaard, French and German philosophers like Heidegger and Sartre would revisit this difficulty. Heidegger distinguished between the concretely existing individual, about whose personal life philosophy must always remain silent, and the purely formal ('ontological') structure of personal existence, which it was the task of philosophy to describe. Heidegger had at his disposal what the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (under whom Heidegger himself had apprenticed as a young professor) called the 'phenomenological' method. This was a method dedicated to the description of experience without being drawn into abstract theories about any deeper reality hidden behind experience. It does not regard experience as a veil to be penetrated but as the very things whose appearance requires an attentive description. Phenomenologists demonstrate a remarkable sensitivity to the details of concrete experience, to very particular experiences that lie beneath the radar of the usual philosophical concepts. Indeed, Kierkegaard himself had shown remarkable phenomenological powers in his famous descriptions of anxiety and despair, which required the delicate sensibility of an artist.

When, at the end of this extract, the young diarist concludes

that the die is cast and he is crossing the Rubicon, we cannot ignore the irony. He was to be after all a writer not a general in the army, the commissioner of police or the bishop. What he would produce was words – a staggering amount by any standard – the point of which was to say that life is not to be found in words. We find him saying things like this again and again in the journals – now is the time for action not words. But he never really did engage the world, not if that meant to marry and assume the responsibilities of a professional position in life. Unless to be an author is already a deed.[5] By posing this quest – to find the truth that is true for me – he had *already found* what he is looking for. The searching is what is searched for. That *would be* his task – to defend the thought that truth is not a thought but a personal task.

Kierkegaard made his excuses to Regine, begged the world's leave, went his own way, following the voice of his own most personal and secret self. His genius was to convert the coin of his own secret life into the currency of a philosophical concept – the category of the 'single individual', 'that single one', which contemporary philosophers call, under his influence, 'singularity' – the unrepeatable, the unique, the secret, something uniquely itself and not a specimen of a kind. This has struck a postmodern chord where modernity affirms the rule of the same and the universal while postmodernity stresses individual differences. As the post-structuralist philosopher Gilles Deleuze would say, what everything has in common is precisely its difference! What makes everything the same is that everything is different. The idea is anticipated in the Middle Ages by the Franciscan theologian John Duns Scotus (d. 1308), who said that in addition to the form that makes a thing a member of one species, of human beings, say, and not another, each thing has the form of 'this-ness' (*haeceeitas*),

which singularizes it and makes it individual, this particular person. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins took over Scotus's idea and built his aesthetic theory around it. A poem, according to Hopkins, is bent on describing a very particular and singular thing and tries to capture its very 'this-ness', but precisely in such a way as to say something of universal import.

This line of thinking proved threatening to a good many people, for whom it suggests relativism or scepticism. It seems to abandon the universal and common standards insisted upon by classical philosophy and to make a headlong plunge into what later on came to be known as 'situation ethics'. While it is true that Kierkegaard and the postmodern tradition he helped bring about were acutely sensitive to the singular circumstances in which each decision is made, there was nothing relativistic about the view. Kierkegaard was urging us to assume responsibility for our lives, to realize that the art of life is to know what to do in circumstances that we alone face and in a situation where no one else can take our place. The task of someone who philosophizes about concrete personal existence is to say something of universal import about the singularity of our lives.

The task of seeking the truth that is true for me makes Kierkegaard something of an anti-philosophical philosopher, writing a philosophy that brushes against the grain of philosophy. He proposes not the business as usual of philosophy as the 'highest' science, as the search for 'first' causes and universal principles. His is a kind of revolutionary anti-philosophy that turns philosophy's head in the opposite direction, toward the *lowest* and least and *last* among us – the subjective, the personal, the existential, the singular, the little 'fragments', as Climacus put it, that Hegel's vast 'system of philosophy' omits. Still, Kierkegaard's motives in turning to the individual are religious and inspired by the

Augustinian and Lutheran model of the individual *alone before God*. The salience of our singularity is a function of standing before God as before an absolute white light where, all masks removed, we must be radically honest with ourselves. In that light, there is no possibility of subterfuge, for God is not fooled.

For Kierkegaard, the focus falls on exposing one's life in time to the light of the eternal, to see oneself '*sub specie aeterni*', from the point of view of eternity. What I do now will have eternal repercussions, will decide my fate in eternity, and I must live my life not based on passing fashions but on the imperatives of eternity. Kierkegaard saw our lives as suspended between two spheres. We are neither merely temporal beings (like animals, whose entire life is immersed in time and materiality) nor purely eternal ones (like angels or the immaterial souls in Plato's philosophy). Nor are we a composite of matter and form as in Aristotle's theory, where the form shapes the matter into this thing rather than that. Rather, we are *poised* between time and eternity, living in the irreducible distance between them, *in* time but *before* eternity. That being poised, that tension between the opposites of time and eternity, is what he means by 'dialectics', and the taxing task of human existence is to learn to span this distance or straddle this opposition, to deal with this dialectical play of opposites. The gap between time and eternity, between earthly happiness and eternal happiness, lies at the bottom of the great either/or upon which he pondered. It is precisely the tension between the two that supplies the energy of existence and gives life its existential passion, like a man on a tightrope stretched over a great abyss.

We can detect this tension in the Gilleleie journal. The 'battle' he refers to at the end of the entry is a war on the 'misunderstanding', by which he meant the Hegelian project of 'reconciling'

time and eternity. Such a reconciliation could only destroy the tensions that define us and rob God of his eternal truth and authority. Kierkegaard's 'existential dialectics' does not reconcile the tension between time and eternity (which can only weaken existence) but intensifies it (which impassions and strengthens human existence). Reconciliation is a ruse that defuses the passion of existence. Between time and eternity there stretches an 'infinite qualitative difference', an 'abyss'.[6] The dialectical sparks are provided by Christianity which is, as St Paul said, the offence and the stumbling block (I Cor 1:23) that the eternal, without compromising its eternity, has made a shocking appearance in time (the Incarnation), with the paradoxical result that our eternal happiness forever depends on a historical moment in the past.

To be a Christian is to live in time while hearing eternity call, to live in eternity while hearing the hall clock strike. It is eternity that singles us out, individualizes us:

> And when the hourglass of time has run out, the hourglass of temporality . . . when everything around you is still, as it is in eternity, then . . . eternity asks you and every individual in these millions and millions about only one thing: whether you have lived in despair [or faith] . . .[7]

Think of a moment in time as a point where the vertical force of eternity intersects with and charges the horizontal line of time. The delicate art of Christian existence is to maintain our equilibrium when that force hits, to move through life under the simultaneous flow of time on the one hand and the shock of eternity on the other. For the Christian each moment is infinitely momentous, and in its balance all eternity hangs. A temporal choice has eternal consequences. All the irony, the

humour, all the poetic indirection at Kierkegaard's disposal were so many means of keeping this tension alive, of walking this tightrope strung out between time and eternity.

What always menaces so delicate a dialectic is to let one side grow too strong at the expense of the other, either by letting the worldly attractions of our life in time overwhelm the demands of eternity – that is called 'worldliness'; or the opposite, by letting the demands of eternity become so great as to annul the significance of life in time – which is called 'other-worldliness' or 'world-weariness'. Kierkegaard is at his best, in my view, when he maintains this equilibrium, but his work becomes more disconcerting when, as happens increasingly in the last years of his life, the fragile valence of time is overwhelmed by the immensity of eternity.

Philosophers like Heidegger, Sartre and Camus kept their distance from the underlying religious idea of 'eternity'. In its place they put 'death', which like eternity also spells the end of time and has a comparable power of concentrating the individual's attention. But human life for Kierkegaard is rather like a man walking along a fault on the earth's surface, with a foot on each side and a chasm below. The menace of the chasm below gives life its passion, its salt, its vitality, and makes life infinitely, eternally interesting – requiring 'this prodigious strenuousness and this prodigious responsibility'.[8] For Kierkegaard, to give up the deep divide between time and eternity is to give up Christianity itself, which is the faith that God became man, that the eternal has come into time in order to give humanity eternal life.

2

AESTHETICISM

If you marry, you will regret it; if you do not marry, you will also regret it; whether you marry or do not marry, you will regret both . . . Believe a woman, you will regret it; believe her not, you will also regret that; whether you believe a woman or believe her not, you will regret it. Hang yourself, you will regret it; do not hang yourself, and you will also regret that; hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret both. This, gentlemen, is the sum and substance of all philosophy. It is not only at certain moments that I view everything *aeterno modo*, as Spinoza says, but I live constantly *aeterno modo.* There are many who think that they live thus, because after having done the one or the other, they combine or mediate the opposites. But this is a misunderstanding; for the true eternity does not lie behind *Either/Or*, but before it. Hence their eternity will be a painful succession of temporal moments, for they will be consumed by a two-fold regret. My philosophy is at least easy to understand, for I have only one principle, and I do not even proceed from that . . . I do not proceed from any principle; for if I did I would regret it, and if I did not, I would also regret that. If it seems, therefore, to one or another of my

> respected hearers that there is anything in what I say, it only proves that he has no talent for philosophy; if my argument seems to have any forward movement, this also proves the same. But for those who can follow me, although I do not make any progress, I shall now unfold the eternal truth, by virtue of which this philosophy remains within itself, and admits of no higher philosophy. For if I proceeded from my principle, I should find it impossible to stop; for if I stopped, I should regret it, and if I did not stop, I should also regret that, and so forth. But since I never start, so can I never stop; my eternal departure is identical with my eternal cessation. Experience has shown that it is by no means difficult for philosophy to begin. Far from it. It begins with nothing and consequently can always begin. But the difficulty, both for philosophy and for philosophers, is to stop. This difficulty is obviated in my philosophy; for if anyone believes that when I stop now, I really stop, he proves himself lacking in the speculative insight. For I do not stop now, I stopped at the time when I began. Hence my philosophy has the advantage of brevity, and is also impossible to refute; for if anyone were to contradict me, I should undoubtedly have the right to call him mad. Thus it is seen that the philosopher lives continuously *aeterno modo*, and has not, like Sintenis of blessed memory, only certain hours which are lived for eternity.
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> (*Either/Or*, 1, pp. 37–9)[9]

Either/Or (1843), a lengthy two-volume book, launched Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works and made its author a local celebrity, although there was a controversy about just who that author was. Kierkegaard had met Regine Olsen in 1837, then but a tender fifteen-year-old (they both record the electricity of the moment) to whom he became engaged in

1840. Doubts beset him immediately and a year later he broke the engagement and took flight to Berlin for several months, there commencing his life as a writer. In *Either/Or*, which established his reputation, Kierkegaard tries to explain himself to Regine and to the world. The book is devoted to an account of the first two of the three stages of existence, that is, the movement of the self beyond a life of pleasure seeking (the aesthetic) to a principled and ethical existence (the ethical). The still higher movement beyond ethics to the life of faith (the religious) is only adumbrated at the end of this book. In this chapter we follow the first volume, which explores the meaning of aesthetic existence and why it is ultimately doomed to break down in failure. But if the goal of the text, only made clear in the second volume, is ethical and ultimately religious, the means, as this extract plainly shows, are ironic and comic.

Either/Or, as its 'editor' Victor Eremita (Victor the Hermit, or even the 'hermitic conqueror') says, is a Chinese puzzle of boxes inside boxes. This extract is from the first volume (the '*Either*'), containing the 'Papers of A', which concludes with the famous 'Diary of a Seducer' by one Johannes (the Seducer). These papers are purportedly the first of two such neatly tied bundles inadvertently discovered by Victor in an old secretary's desk. The second bundle, the papers of 'B' (the *Or*), contains three letters by one 'Judge Wilhelm', sent to A, the last of which contains a sermon sent to the Judge by a priest friend on the remote heaths of northern Jutland.

Employing five pseudonymous figures in this book alone, the reader reaches a point in the 'Diary of the Seducer' and the 'Ultimatum' texts pivotal to the final dialectical twist of each volume, that is three removes of authorship away from Kierkegaard. This in turn invites speculation about whether A

is simply too embarrassed to admit that this is in fact his own diary, whether A and B are really the same, or whether the whole thing is the work of Victor alone. Kierkegaard joined the public debate about the real author in a whimsical review, 'Who is the Author of Either/Or?', published under the pseudonym 'A. F.', arguing that this debate is not worth the trouble and that one is better served to employ one's wits on the book itself. By the time Kierkegaard concluded the pseudonymous authorship in 1845, it was common knowledge that he was the author of these materials. Pseudonymity was not an unusual literary practice in mid-century Denmark, and while the actual authors soon became public knowledge, the practice was to respect the author's true identity in reviews and commentary.

A expounds a scandalously narcissistic or aesthetic existence, a life that turns entirely on giving oneself pleasure, ranging from the most basic and sensual to the highest and most artistic pleasures, whatever the cost to others. 'B', the Judge, a happily married man, defends the principles of ethics and a sense of one's duties under the law. Kierkegaard later said that the 'Diary of the Seducer' was meant to repel Regine, to convince her that she was well rid of him, and to uphold the honour of marriage, from which he had recently made himself a notorious exception. This extract is from 'Diapsalmata' in Volume I; the word is taken from the Greek Septuagint meaning 'musical interludes' or 'refrains'. The extract is one of a series of aphorisms that lay down the ironic and humorous 'principles' of the unprincipled life of an aesthete. The text is meant to taunt the Hegelians, the dominant intellectual influence in Danish philosophy and theology in the mid-nineteenth century. Kierkegaard is playing on the central Hegelian tenet that the principle of movement in the 'System' is the power of the

negative embodied in the principle of contradiction. Movement is described by Hegel as the negation of a prior affirmation. Thus, in his *Logic*, Hegel begins his dialectic with the concept of 'being' – the most general and presupposition-less concept – and passes to its negation, 'non-being', which provides the transition to 'becoming'. Both pure being and pure nothingness are motionless abstractions, whereas the real and concrete world is made of up becoming, which is the unity of being and non-being. Hegel tries to make a presup-positionless start (assuming nothing) and to conclude by including everything (finality) in the concretely embodied idea (the concrete universal). The dialectical result is the higher unity of the affirmation and negation, which are nul-lified in their abstract opposition to each other and lifted up into a higher and concrete unity. To put this in the language that became popular under the influence of Marx, the 'syn-thesis' is the higher unity of the 'thesis' and the 'antithesis'. The price to pay for this reconciling unity is to have the courage for negation.

But for A negativity is too high a cost and he has found a less demanding solution that does not take so much out of a fellow. By not adopting a thesis at all, he does not have to suffer the blows of an antithesis. By not taking a position, he will not suffer opposition or contradiction. By not taking a stand or making a decision, he does not have to withstand negative consequences. He is not for anything so that he does not have to be against anything either. He never allows the gears of the dialectical machine to be engaged, but situates himself instead in a sphere *prior* to or above the realm in which the principle of contradiction applies. Once one is exposed to the winds of reality or actuality, which is precisely where the principle of contradiction reigns, the game is already lost.

There, in the realm of actuality, you are forced to choose and however you choose, you will lose. Whatever you decide will have consequences by which you will be battered and bruised.

If you marry the girl, her waist will wax and her beauty will wane; she will become a bore and make demands upon you that you will surely regret. But if you do not marry her, the world will scorn you as a womanizer who wasted a girl's time and treated her cruelly, and that you will also regret. If you commit yourself to a cause or to a friend, you will regret it. Eventually they will show up at your door and demand a follow-through, asking that you make good on your promise, and at such an inopportune time, just as you were about to go on holiday. But if you do not commit yourself, your social invitations will fall off and you will get a reputation as a lazy or a selfish fellow, and that is to be regretted. Either way, either/or, you will regret it, so the solution – rather than the higher reconciling resolution – is never to let the gears of this either/or get engaged, never to allow yourself to get caught in its suction. 'This, gentlemen, is the sum and substance of all philosophy.' This is the wisdom of eternity. But for an aesthete, eternity does not mean to fight one's way through 'a painful succession of temporal moments' and so to rise above the limited temporal points of view in order to take the higher view of eternity – 'this is a misunderstanding'. The aesthete prefers the eternity that lays low and never gets drawn into the time's turmoil – 'for the true eternity does not lie behind either/or, but before it'.

That is A's maxim, his point of departure. But on second thoughts, if he commits himself to a point of departure, he would regret it (just as he would if he did not). If he had a point of departure, that would imply he was in motion, and that others should follow, and then they would all regret it.

This very unprincipled way of acting should not be taken as a rigorous principle, a rule or a law. You will always regret making resolutions of any kind if you do not reserve the right to take them back. The whole idea in 'aestheticism' is to station oneself decisively in the field of indecision and freedom from choice. Aesthetic existence is a delicate art, one that requires a gifted nature, demanding a deft and light touch, a little like a honey bee that can alight upon a flower, extract its delicious nectars and move on. The art is to abide strictly in the sphere of possibility, to remain eternally young, with an eye that sees possibility everywhere while taking shelter from the harsh winds of actuality (40). In Hegel's dialectics, the goal is to bring everything to a final conclusion in a comprehensive system, which is not possible for a finite, temporal spirit. A is relieved of that heavy duty. He does not have to bring things to a conclusion because he never really starts.

If avoiding the principle of contradiction is the paradoxical principle of this unprincipled aesthetic existence, the 'Rotation Method' that follows is the strategy for implementing it. For the aesthete, the root of all evil is boredom – not the love of money or idleness, which can be divine so long as one is not bored (284–5). The aesthete requires a capacity to make things 'interesting' or amusing, like a man stuck in a boring lecture, who interests himself in the bead of sweat forming on the speaker's brow at the start of the lecture, follows its slow course down his nose only to drop at the crucial point when the speaker reaches his *ergo*. The strategies the aesthete hits upon are based on an agrarian analogy: the rotation of crops. One may ensure a good harvest by planting the same crop in different fields each year so as not to exhaust the soil, which is called the extensive method. If one's resources are limited, one may rotate different crops in the same field,

which is called the intensive method. In matters of love, one may rotate or play the field, moving from girl to girl, not lingering long enough to incur the regrets of a commitment. That is the art of Don Juan, who seduced a thousand and one women in Spain, the 'and one' being added, A remarks, to give a realistic ring to the count; his art is artless, sheer sensuality, a gigantic passion, lacking intrigue. He simply tries to melt a girl down with sheer desire.

Alternatively, an aesthete may cultivate one field only, tending it patiently, in a long-term seduction that would win a girl slowly over time without losing interest. Requiring indirection, reflection and patience, this is a riskier business because it can lead to engagement and marriage, which the aesthete will regret, or the ugliness of a breach or a divorce, which are also very unpleasant. Thus it would be a truly interesting experiment to see if one could seduce a girl, even get engaged to her and enjoy the physical fruits of the seduction, without all the regretful consequences of actually getting married. The trick is to break the engagement by getting the girl to break it, to believe that it was all her idea while you, poor chap, are the wounded party. This requires the dual art of 'forgetting' (avoiding attachments along the way) and 'remembering', for here the poetic recollection of the affair is essential to the pleasure, multiplying and even exceeding in value the actual execution of the plan. An aesthete enjoys even more the afterglow of looking through his scrapbook of past enjoyments.

This is the plot of the notorious 'Diary of the Seducer', the final essay in Volume I, which is an exercise in how to get engaged without regretting it (297), and the cause of a considerable sensation in Copenhagen at the time. The Diary is the story of the seduction of Cordelia, a young and innocent girl, by an older sophisticated aesthete named Johannes, which

incorporates numerous details of Søren Kierkegaard's courtship of Regine. Meeting Cordelia by chance at the home of a mutual friend Johannes minutely plans a campaign to win her. He waits for hours on a street corner he knows Cordelia will cross only in order to briskly pass her by as if he did not notice her while making sure she notices him. He revisits their mutual friend's home and dazzles everyone with his conversation while ignoring her. Eventually he chances upon Edward who is in love with Cordelia but very bashful, and he graciously volunteers to chaperone the young man's courtship. After charming Cordelia's aunt with a witty and entertaining conversation which Cordelia cannot but overhear while leaving the witless Edward free to bore Cordelia, Johannes decides that, having exhausted his usefulness, Edward must go. Offering to make a proposal of marriage to Cordelia on Edward's behalf, he instead proposes to her himself, telling Edward that this surprising outcome was the aunt's doing. There follows a courtship in which Johannes slowly induces in Cordelia the idea that the engagement is an artificial and external trapping which sullies the inner purity and freedom of their love. She is eventually convinced and breaks the official engagement herself, eliciting the sympathy of her aunt for poor Johannes, who has been dealt a harsh blow. After the love affair is physically consummated (alluded to only very discreetly), Johannes drops her, making this last entry in the 'Diary':

> Why cannot such a night be longer? . . . Still it is over now, and I hope never to see her again. When a girl has given away everything, she is weak, she has lost everything . . . I do not wish to be reminded of my relation to her; she has lost the fragrance . . . It would, however, really be worth while to know whether or not one might be able to poetize himself out of a

> girl, so that one could make her so proud that she would imagine it was she who tired of the relationship. It could become a very interesting epilogue, which, in its own right, might have psychological interest, and along with that enrich one with many erotic observations. (439–40)

The 'Diary' exhibits the breakdown of the aesthetic form of existence, rather in the way in which, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel shows the ascending development of the 'spirit' by way of the breakdown ('contradictions') of the lower forms of consciousness. The aestheticism of Johannes leads to the ethical 'contradiction' of his cruel abuse of the tender affections of a young woman. Like Hegel, Kierkegaard thinks in terms of a kind of education of the spirit by way of a gradual ascent to higher or richer forms of life as lower forms collapse from internal contradictions. While this is conceived by Hegel as a movement of the mind or of thinking, for Kierkegaard it is a movement of existence, a passage through concrete forms of life, a movement not of thinking but of ways of actually living. Aestheticism as an independent and self-sufficient form of life leads to 'despair', an existence in ruins, an existential contradiction not a logical one, by means of which, repelled by the horror of an amoral life, we are moved to surpass it. It is not Johannes, of course, but rather we, the readers of this 'Diary', who experience this need to move on. Johannes is left behind, as Hegel might have said, but the reader moves up. Aesthetic existence for Kierkegaard is a dead end, but not because it is internally inconsistent, a logical contradiction, for it is all too coldly logical and consistent. Rather, it is a moral nightmare, an outrage of our moral sensibilities, which is what induces in us the need for a higher point of view.

It is worth noting that Kierkegaard is often treated as a relentless opponent of Hegel, but that is not entirely true. It is true that Kierkegaard had testy relations with the Hegelians of Copenhagen. They are all score keepers of the game of philosophy, Kierkegaard said, but nobody plays the game, meaning they write commentaries on Hegel but they are not original thinkers themselves. It is also true that he fought all his life against the central upshot of Hegel's 'System', its goal of a comprehensive and systematic account of God and history. But Kierkegaard nonetheless remained deeply under the influence of Hegel himself; he admired Hegel and used Hegelian means in order to produce un-Hegelian results. *Either/Or* is a very good example of this. It proposes an alternate or rival 'phenomenology' – that is, an exhibition of the various forms or ascending stages of life, not of 'consciousness' (Hegel) but of 'existence' – in which our outrage at the amoralism of Johannes is meant to arouse our moral sensibility and to launch the ascent or 'climb' up Climacus's ladder. Kierkegaard's goal was not to produce a comprehensive system of philosophy, as in Hegel, but to awaken the intensity and passion of existence in the individual.

3

THE ETHICAL

Let us now glance at the relation between romantic and conjugal love . . . Conjugal love begins with possession and acquires inward history. It is faithful. So is romantic love – but now note the difference. The faithful romantic lover waits, let us say, for fifteen years – then comes the instant which rewards him. Here poetry sees very rightly that the fifteen years can very well be concentrated. It hastens on, then, to the moment. A married man is faithful for fifteen years, yet during those fifteen years he has had possession, so in that long succession of time he has continuously acquired the faithfulness he possessed, since after all conjugal love contains within itself first love and by the same token the fidelity thereof. But such an ideal marriage cannot be represented, for the point is time in its extension. At the end of the fifteen years he has apparently got no further than he was at the beginning, yet he has lived in a high degree aesthetically. His possession has not been like dead property, but he has constantly been acquiring his possession. He has not fought with lions and ogres, but with the most dangerous enemy: with time. But for him eternity does not come afterwards as in the

> case of the knight, but he has had eternity in time, has preserved eternity in time. He alone, therefore, has triumphed over time; for one can say of the knight he has killed time, as indeed a man constantly wishes to kill time when it has no reality for him. The married man, being a true conqueror, has not killed time but has saved and preserved in eternity. The married man who does this, truly lives poetically. He solves the great riddle of living in eternity and yet hearing the hall clock strike, and hearing it in such a way that the stroke of the hour does not shorten but prolongs his eternity . . . When, then, I willingly admit that romantic love lends itself more aptly to artistic representation than does conjugal love, this is not by any means to say that the latter is less aesthetic than the former; on the contrary, it is more aesthetic . . . Conjugal love has its foe in time, its triumph in time, its eternity in time . . . It is faithful, constant, humble, patient, long-suffering, indulgent, sincere, contented, vigilant, willing, joyful . . . The individual is not fighting with external foes but fights with himself, fights out love from within him. And they have reference to time, for their truth does not consist in being once for all but in being constantly what they are . . . Of this fact you and all natures born for conquest have no conception . . . when the battle is won, when the last echo of the last shot has died away, when the swift thoughts, like a staff officer hurrying back to headquarters, report that the victory is yours – then, in fact, you know nothing, you know not how to begin; for then, for the first time you are at the true beginning.
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> (*Either/Or*, 2, pp. 140–43)[10]

In the second volume of *Either/Or*, the transition is made from the aesthetic to the ethical mode of existing. Here we are introduced to the 'existential self', which represents a deep

shift in the philosophical understanding of the self. Instead of thinking of the self in the classical terms of nature or substance, as some underlying essence or selfsame thing, Kierkegaard proposes the radically different categories of freedom, resolve and choice. The self is what it does, what it makes of itself, or fails to, an idea not unlike one found in American pragmatism. The proposal is troubling to philosophers of a more traditional frame of mind. For by defining human beings in terms of freedom, Kierkegaard seems to dislodge humanity from the order of nature and to break its link with the great chain of being. In Kierkegaard himself, such freedom is always exercised vis-à-vis God, who functions like a fulcrum or an Archimedean point, but in the secular existentialists who followed him, God fell foul of this new-found freedom, and freedom threatened to swing more freely.

This extract is taken from the series of letters addressed to the aesthete in which the Judge advances the cause of marriage over the solitary self-indulgence of the aesthete. The Judge charges in particular that by failing to choose, the aesthete fails to have a self at all. The best way to see the distinction the Judge is drawing between the aesthetic and the ethical standpoints is to go back to the background distinction between time and eternity. The aesthete lacks a genuine engagement with time because he lacks engagement with reality, and this in turn because he has a shallow experience of eternity. The aesthete lives in and for the moment, for its passing, ephemeral and accidental pleasures. Even when he invests time, as when Johannes waits for hours for Cordelia to pass by – or even if he waits fifteen years in a Romantic novel – it is for the sake of the instant which vanishes no sooner than it appears. Eternity for the aesthete is well illustrated by the Romantic poet Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', a poem about a depiction of two

lovers forever poised to kiss whose lips will never meet, forever young, forever anticipating a kiss that never takes place. But in ethics, eternity means the force of a steady and abiding commitment through a succession of moments, something to be fought for and won in an endless wrestling with time. When the romantic lover says 'I do' the curtain closes, the novel is over, and the reality of the daily life that follows is volatilized in a dreamy fantasy. But to say 'I do' in the rush of existence is just to begin, to pledge oneself for the future, to vow to move steadily forward, managing the stream of time with the steadiness of eternity, practising the art of 'living in eternity while hearing the hall clock strike'. Romantic love is easy to represent because it turns on dramatic moments – the lovers meet, the sparks fly up, they are separated for fifteen years that are concentrated into five pages, and then they are reunited, thrust into each other's arms, all is well, the end. Marital life cannot be easily represented in art because it is the small, invisible, quotidian growth of the day-to-day, where outwardly nothing happens. Romantic love is like a general who knows how to conquer but not how to govern once the last shot is fired. Unlike the aesthete, who knows how to 'kill time', married people master time without killing it. Marital time is about the wise use and governance of time, setting one's hands to the plough of the day-to-day.

Ethics is lived in the rough and tumble of 'actuality'. The Danish word for actuality (*Virkelighedens*) is the cognate of the German *Wirklichkeit*, the realm where real results are produced. In *Repetition*, published in the same year, a pseudonym named Constantine Constantius distinguishes 'recollection', which 'repeats backwards' (revisits something by going back in time), from 'repetition', which 'recollects forwards' (collects or gathers a thing together in a forward motion). In recollection, the

actuality of life merely provides the occasion of an aesthetic reflection, offering a pleasure snipped from reality like a dried flower that can be savoured for all eternity – in a poem or painting, a diary or a daydream. For an aesthete, a love affair, life itself, is always essentially over, shipped off to eternity before it even has a chance to start, in which the beloved conveniently provided the 'occasion' of an aesthetic reverie. Repetition, on the other hand, presses forward, producing what it repeats as the effect of its repetition, the way a vow is kept by being repeated every day. A marriage is made in time, forged over the course of time. In repetition, the goal is always ahead, the prize to be won. The future-oriented figure of repetition is variously drawn from St Paul for whom faith is a struggle to be won, from the 'daily battle' of faith in Augustine's *Confessions*, and from Luther's 'theology of the cross' (*theologia crucis*).

In aesthetic life, repetition is doomed to failure. If you never forget your first time, you can also never repeat it! First love cannot be repeated, only recollected. But in Kierkegaard's view of ethics, everything turns on the possibility of repetition. In ethics, we stand always at the beginning and the future is ahead, each day offering a new challenge to say 'I do' again, so that it is only at the end that 'I do' comes fully true; only at the end is the vow finally kept. Kierkegaard here strikes out in a different direction from Aristotle. For Aristotle, ethics is a matter of forming a 'habit' of virtue rather than beginning anew in each moment. An Aristotelian 'habit' facilitates the practice of virtue, while in Kierkegaardian repetition it is the difficulty that is stressed. Marital love 'contains within itself first love and by the same token the fidelity thereof'. All the romance of first love is taken up into marriage where it is transformed, preserved, and deepened into a lifelong fidelity.

For the Judge the aesthete has no self, if to have a self

means the abiding continuity of a faithful self. The aesthete's life is volatilized into a series of discontinuous moments, governed by the rule of forgetting whatever is unpleasant about the past and recalling only its pleasures, and of reducing the future to a new supply of possible diversions. The aesthete lacks the unity of existence conferred upon life by assuming responsibility for the past and giving assurance that one's word will be kept in the future. As Kierkegaard puts it, his only concern is to avoid having his coat-tails caught in the door of actuality – that is, to elude unpleasantness by avoiding every commitment.

The new conception of the 'self' that is unfolded in *Either/Or* provided the basis of Heidegger's notion of the existential self in his seminal work *Being and Time*. The aesthete lacks a self because his life lacks the decisiveness of a choice, the most pointed example of which for Kierkegaard is the marital vow. The 'moment,' a term that also has a central role to play in *Being and Time*, is not a slice of time frozen on the face of a Grecian urn but the moment of choice, or moment of truth, that is charged by the enduring commitment of the vow. In the moment, the dispersed flow of life is gathered into a unity. In what Heidegger would call 'authentic resoluteness', the self assumes responsibility for its past and its future, committing itself to a course of action and accepting responsibility for its consequences. A self then is a unity in which all that one has been and commits oneself to is gathered together in a moment of decision. In Kierkegaard's terms, the temporality of the self has been intersected and charged by eternity, by which he means here not the eternity of the afterlife but what he calls the 'eternal validity' of the self, its enduring continuity as a self, which is a structure of ethical fidelity.

All this the aesthete would concede. But his point is to avoid all the strenuous exertion of having such a continuous self and all the cumbersome responsibilities of such an engaged freedom. He would rather have his cigar than a self. The Judge argues that the ethical (marriage) does not annul the aesthetic (the erotic) but builds a fence of moral safety around it that allows it to flourish in the conjugal garden rather than perish in the wild. The aesthete would greet that argument with a yawn. The aesthete has not adopted the moral point of view *to begin with*, and it is only if one has the moral point of view that the Judge's arguments will register. The Judge is arguing that morality is morally superior to aestheticism, a point the aesthete would unequivocally endorse, but it is the morality that he objects to. There are no moral reasons you can bring to bear on Johannes because he declines to enter the very sphere of moral reasoning itself. The aesthete refuses to play the game of choice at all, except in the sense that he chooses not to chose. Like Bartleby the Scrivener in Herman Melville's short story, his one preference is that he would prefer not to. So at a crucial point the Judge realizes that his real task is to get the aesthete, not exactly to choose, but to 'choose to choose'. Once the project of choice is launched, the Judge will trust the dynamics of Protestant conscience to lead the aesthete down the path of the good and to steer him clear of evil. The Judge's fundamental task is to induce the aesthete to choose to have a moral point of view. In *Either/Or*, the alternatives are not choosing to be an aesthete versus choosing to be ethical, but more precisely preferring not to choose at all versus a life of choice.

Kierkegaardian ethics is mistakenly accused of 'decisionism' by thinkers like Alasdair McIntyre,[11] which means making

everything turn on heartfelt choices without regard to the content of the choice. That is a confusion caused by mistaking the level on which Kierkegaard is arguing. Kierkegaard is not searching for the criterion on whose basis we can make this choice rather than that; on this point he thinks we will be guided by the moral norms embedded in conscience and the example of Christ. But he is offering a concrete description of the difference between a life of choice and a life without choice, and he is counting on the description to do the heavy lifting. He is urging the aesthete to get into the moral game, to let the ethical significance of a choice *matter*. To awaken our moral sensibility he contrasts life on the ethical plane with the cruel mistreatment of Cordelia. He attempts to stir up the moral point of view, not to make a case for one course of action over another. We see little hope for Johannes, forever resistant to the Judge's forays. So be it. His fate is of no matter. He has no fate. Johannes does not even exist. His is but a character in a work of fiction, an aesthetic personification of the abstract idea of aestheticism as a form of life. It is we readers who exist, and our moral sensibilities have not gone dead. It is we who, beholding in Johannes the horror of pure aestheticism writ large, are to be moved by these portraits.

The last turn in the existential dialectic that unfolds in *Either/Or* is taken in the 'Ultimatum', a sermon mailed to the Judge by a friend who serves as a priest in Jutland, the barren heaths on the northern coast. In an 'existential dialectic', a form of life emerges only to collapse under the strain of the inner tension by which it is torn, and we are thereby shifted to a still higher stage. The sermon is a reflection on the thought that before God no one is in the right. The court of God is no place to try to prove oneself right, the

sermon says. 'One does what one can' will not go far with God. Have you not looked within yourself and grown dizzy with the vertigo of anxiety when you considered how great is the evil of which you are capable? Better to confess that one is in the wrong, which means to begin anew in each instant, resolving to do better. Better to enter into relation with an infinite standard, to adopt an absolute point of view, rather than to insist that if you are not always in the right at least you are a lot better than some others, which is to remain in a finite and relative standpoint. Make this thought your own, the pastor concludes, 'for only the truth which edifies is truth for you'.

The Judge has passed this letter on for the aesthete's edification but the point of the 'Ultimatum' is that its message is visited upon the Judge himself: before God even the Judge, who is used to being right, is in the wrong. Before God, ethics is pride. There is a standpoint higher than the moral point of view, a more absolute and unconditional one. As long as one remains within an ethical frame of reference we are tempted to conclude that we have discharged our duties and we are in the right. Can ethics then actually pose a *temptation*? Might ethics lure us away from the unconditional absolute relationship with God by lulling us into self-complacency? Might ethics turn out to be a relationship to the universal, to the 'divine' (*theios*) in the Greek sense, when what is required is a personal relationship with God (*theos*)? The sermon exposes the 'despair' that inheres in the ethical, the hole it leaves in existence, in the same way as the 'Diary of the Seducer' exposes the despair inherent in aestheticism. The sermon warns us against the risks that are run if ethical life is left standing as a self-sufficient and final point of view. By remaining in the ethical point of view the

self is deprived of the absolute point of view and caused to settle for a standard that is something less than the absolute holiness of God.

We can see now the dialectical movement of the book, the way a given point of view emerges only to give way to its inner tensions. The Judge is trying to lead the aesthete out of the solitude of self love and into the community of what holds universally true for all human beings, but the pastor's sermon is inching the Judge, and the reader with him, towards the religious exception to the universal that will be the subject of his next book, *Fear and Trembling.* In an observation whose poignancy and autobiographical significance we cannot fail to feel, the Judge says that he can think of one case when a man might be excused, even dissuaded, from marrying: when one's inner life is so complicated that it cannot be revealed. That secret inner life will poison the marriage, for either his wife will never understand him, or if she does, she will be drawn into his anxiety and never be happy herself.

Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus once quipped that he had no head for philosophy. That is a deeply ironic understatement, for what we find in the letters of the Judge to the aesthete is nothing less than a veritable paradigm shift in how to think about the human self. Instead of adopting the classical metaphysics of the self as a substance or soul, an essence or nature, Kierkegaard introduces us to the self as a text woven from the fabric of freedom, as a tissue of choices. Instead of conceiving the human as safely embedded in an order of essence or hierarchy of being, as subject to the necessities of a natural law, Kierkegaard is saying that we are what we do. The self is not an underlying and permanent substance but a task to be achieved in and through and as a uniquely human

experience of time. A self is a task that may be accomplished or that fails to be accomplished, which is the basis of Heidegger's distinction between 'authenticity' and 'inauthenticity', which displaces older distinctions like 'natural and unnatural', or even 'good and evil'. 'Self' emerges as a fundamentally different 'category', a category of freedom, and it is no longer to be thought of as a thing, or *res*, no matter how well equipped a thing, even if you go so far as to rig it out as a rational or a spiritual or a 'thinking thing', a *res cogitans* (Descartes). A self is a form of freedom, not a sort of thing.

The conceptual revolution carried out by Kierkegaard opened the door to 'Existentialism'. When Heidegger said of the self that 'its "essence" lies in existence', and when Sartre wrote that in human beings 'existence precedes essence', meaning that the 'what' or the 'who' is the outcome of a choice, they spoke as heirs of Kierkegaard. This is a disconcerting discovery for many thinkers, because it removes the stable norms provided by 'essence' and 'nature' and seems to hand over to human beings the power to make themselves what they will. In Kierkegaard himself, that tendency is always held in check by God, but if God is removed, as happens in the atheistic existentialism of Camus and Sartre, everything is changed. Then the door is opened to the existential revolt against God in the name of freedom.

The conceptual breakthrough effected in this text speaks for itself, whoever has signed the text. We recall the advice of 'A. F.' that we would do better to enter into the debate being conducted within the covers of *Either/Or* than to dwell on identifying the name on the cover. The texts of *Either/Or* have been brought into the world as 'orphans', as Plato says about the written word, produced by a real author who pointedly disowned them and attributed them to imaginary authors

who do not exist. By what then are we to be guided? Who shall be our beacon? We have been thrown on our own and we have to decide for ourselves. After all, the only truth that matters is the truth 'for us'.

4

THE KNIGHT OF FAITH

I wonder if anyone in my generation is able to make the movements of faith? If I (*in the capacity of tragic hero,* for higher I cannot come) had been ordered to take such an extraordinary royal journey as the one to Mount Moriah, I know very well what I would have done. I would not have been cowardly enough to stay at home, nor would I have dragged and drifted along the road . . . But I also know what else I would have done. The moment I mounted the horse, I would have said to myself: Now all is lost, God demands Isaac, I sacrifice him and along with him all my joy . . . That I was determined to make the movement could prove my courage, humanly speaking – that I loved him with my whole soul is the presupposition without which the whole thing becomes a misdeed – nevertheless I would not have loved as Abraham loved, for then I would have held back at the very last minute . . . Furthermore . . . if I had got Isaac again, I would have been in an awkward position . . . What was easiest for Abraham would have been difficult for me – once again to be happy in Isaac.

But what did Abraham do? He arrived neither too early nor too late. He mounted the ass, he rode slowly down the road.

During all this time he had faith, he had faith that God would not demand Isaac of him, and yet he was willing to sacrifice him if it was demanded. He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question, and it certainly was absurd that God, who required it of him, should in the next moment rescind the requirement. He climbed the mountain, and even in the moment when the knife gleamed he had faith – that God would not require Isaac. No doubt he was surprised at the outcome, but through a double-movement he had attained his first condition, and therefore he received Isaac more joyfully than the first time. Let us go further. We let Isaac actually be sacrificed. Abraham had faith. He did not have faith that he would be blessed in a future life but that he would be blessed here in the world. God could give him a new Isaac, could restore to life the one sacrificed. He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for all human calculation ceased long ago . . . But to be able to lose one's understanding and along with it everything finite, for which it is the stockbroker, and then to win the very same finitude again by virtue of the absurd – this appals me, but that does not make me say it is something inferior, since, on the contrary, it is the one and only marvel . . . This is the peak on which Abraham stands. The last stage to pass from his view is the stage of infinite resignation. He actually goes further and comes to faith . . . Abraham I cannot understand . . . Our generation does not stop with faith, does not stop with the miracle of faith, turning water into wine – it goes further and turns wine into water.

(*Fear and Trembling*, pp. 34–7)[12]

Fear and Trembling is arguably Kierkegaard's most famous and controversial work. A book of less than 125 pages in English translation, it introduces us to the 'religious', the third and

highest stage of existence, by following the well-known story of Abraham and the binding of Isaac. For Kierkegaard, the moral of this story is that ethical rule admits of exception, because God, who is the author of the moral law, can suspend any given law if God so chooses. That is a profoundly dangerous position to take, but never more so than today, when we are swept up in religious violence and menaced by people who feel authorized, even commanded, to kill in the name of God. *Fear and Trembling* appears to realize the worst fears of those who are troubled by Kierkegaard's view that 'truth is subjectivity'. Is something true just so long as you are deeply and passionately convinced that it is true? Is that not the very definition of fanaticism? That is precisely the problem with which everyone must wrestle who approaches this text. While I will focus on this problem, I will also introduce, at the end of the chapter, an important and productive 'postmodern' twist brought out by Jacques Derrida's reading of *Fear and Trembling*.

The pseudonymous author of the text bears the name 'Johannes de Silentio' (John of Silence), which signifies the inexpressible, incomprehensible situation in which Abraham finds himself. Abraham is reduced to silence; he cannot explain to others what he is doing because he does not understand it himself. When he does speak it is ironic – asked by Isaac where the lamb is for the sacrifice, he responds only that God will provide. In striking contrast to the Abraham portrayed in previous chapters of Genesis, he does not debate with God or try to strike a bargain. In the economic metaphor that runs throughout the book, de Silentio maintains that his contemporaries have been peddling faith at a cut-rate price while purporting to surpass faith by means of philosophical knowledge. His job, therefore, is to show how costly real faith

is and how, far from getting beyond it, Abraham spent a whole life trying to get as far as faith. The true price of faith is the *horror religiosus*, the fear and the trembling of Abraham's dreadful task, which confounds the Hegelian philosophers, those stockbrokers of the finite who deal only with the sensible, the human, the immanent. The slow ascent to Mount Moriah is filled with the terror. Abraham is isolated before God, denied the comforts of the universal, stripped of an explanation, and deprived of human community and human language.

If Abraham had been asked to sacrifice Isaac, whom he loved more than his own life, in order to deal with some awful but inescapable necessity, to save his nation, for example, rather than as a test or 'ordeal' demanded by God that served no human purpose, then Abraham would be a 'tragic hero', positioned at the extreme limits of ethics and understandability. On his best day, de Silentio says, he might have been capable of that; but 'higher I cannot come'. There are examples of such 'tragic heroes' in literature – Agamemnon, who sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia to save his city, and Socrates, who stood by his principles and accepted the sentence of death handed down by the Athenian court. They are men who were willing to sacrifice all for the good of the city or to stand by a principle. Nations and principles make sense, but Abraham is called upon to leave such sense ('human calculation') as this behind. He must give up Isaac. That is the first movement, that of infinite resignation, but then he makes a second and higher movement, the movement of faith. Socrates and Agamemnon are men of principle, pushed to the highest and most heroic limits of principle, ready to lose all for the sake of protecting the principle. But faith is a second movement, beyond the universality of the

principle:

> Faith is this paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal – but please note, in such a way that the movement repeats itself, so that after having been in the universal he as the single individual isolates himself as higher than the universal. If this is not faith, then Abraham is lost . . . For if the ethical – that is, social morality – is the highest and if there is in a person no residual incommensurability in some way such that this incommensurability is not evil . . . then no categories are needed other than what Greek philosophy had . . . (55)

Ethically speaking, Abraham was willing to commit murder. Ethically, a father should love his son more than he loves himself. Thus if Abraham is not a tragic hero, then he is a murderer – unless there is another category, which is faith.

Abraham never doubted God's promise that he would be the father of generations as multiple as the stars in sky. Notice that the promise concerned *this world*, a kind of earthly immortality in time, not life after death, not a truly eternal life. Abraham trusted God: God would never let him go through with it, or God would replace Isaac with another son – Abraham and Sarah were over a hundred years old – or even, most paradoxically, God would restore the life of Isaac after he was sacrificed. Abraham did not understand God's ways but 'he had faith by virtue of the absurd, for all human calculation ceased long ago'. With God all things are possible, even things that are impossible for us. A lesser man might be capable of a movement of infinite resignation, of giving up on the finite, surrendering his own will, for the sake of the infinite, of doing the will of God. A lesser man could understand that

sons must sometimes be sacrificed for a cause and would be able to resign himself to the loss of something finite in order to conform to the infinite, to the law of God. That is what de Silentio means by the 'knight of infinite resignation' (42–4), a person who with all the courage of a knight goes to the limit of giving up his own will, but who does this with no expectation that his loss will ever be recovered. But Abraham is a figure of what de Silentio calls the 'knight of faith' (38–41), which means that Abraham made a second movement. Abraham had faith that Isaac, once surrendered to God, would also be restored. God would be true to his promise and Abraham would be able to receive Isaac back joyfully even after giving him up. A knight of infinite resignation, on the other hand, who was sure all was lost, would be quite confounded by such an unexpected turn of events. The restoration of Isaac is a still higher 'repetition' that exceeds purely human powers and depends entirely upon the power of God. To be sure, one must not go to the other extreme, of a certain 'fideism' that would be so trusting in God as to take God for granted and annul the fear and trembling. God was testing the faith of Abraham, not playing a game with him to see how big a gamble Abraham was willing to take. Abraham trusted God, and he was not simply betting that God would be the first one to blink in this high stakes game. Then Abraham would be remembered not as the father of faith but as the father of poker.

Now we can view together the movements of the three stages of existence. The aesthete bends all his efforts to stay below the universal where he is free to savour his personal pleasures, eluding the grasp of the law. The Judge with resolute step embraces the universal and plants his feet squarely in the rough and tumble of actuality and the law. But the 'knight

of faith' makes the leap of faith, entering the solitude of the one-to-one relationship with God, where the authority of universal laws is suspended. The knight is not tempted against ethics but the ethical is itself the temptation. Abraham is tempted to have recourse to the law ('thou shalt not kill'), which would excuse him from this terrible responsibility. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant said that Abraham was duty bound to question a voice that dared command a patently immoral deed and yet purport to be the voice of God. But for Kierkegaard, that is to put the universal divine (*theios*) before the personal God (*theos*); it is to put ethics before God. The eternal living God sets his own terms and does not conform to human conditions. Abraham underwent what de Silentio calls a 'teleological suspension of the ethical'. The individual, deprived of the cover of the universal ethical, is exposed to the terrible face of the Most High.

But what would a 'knight of faith', a person who had the faith of Abraham, look like? Would he not be the most extraordinary, terrifying personage, like the Baptist out in the desert dressed in sackcloth? Not so, says de Silentio. Were we ever to chance upon such a man, we would jump back, clap our hands and exclaim, 'Good Lord, is this the man, is this really the one – he looks just like a tax collector!' (39). There would be nothing in his outer appearance to betray his link with the infinite. One might mistake him for any 'mercantile soul' pausing to observe some construction underway while walking home to dinner. The important thing is that 'he does not do even the slightest thing except by virtue of the absurd'. He would have renounced every pleasure of the world: although he receives them gladly in his heart he can do without them. He gives up everything, but he has them restored 'by virtue of the absurd'. (40). Kierkegaard's

knight of faith is an exemplar of the Protestant Ideal and a perfect realization of the dialectical tension he is trying to maintain. The knight of faith does not leave the world and enter a monastery, but maintains a perfect equilibrium between finite and infinite, at home in time while knowing that his true home is in eternity.[13] He is all inwardness, maintaining a one-to-one relationship to God, while treating the finite as something the Lord gives, but the Lord may take away, a sentiment from the book of Job that is explored in *Repetition*, a companion book to *Fear and Trembling* published on the same day. The religious is a repetition carried out in virtue of the absurd, one altogether in God's hands, unlike aesthetic repetition, which is menaced by frustration (like trying to repeat a first love), and unlike ethical repetition, which depends upon the strength of our frail and sinful will. Faith is not only the highest but the only real repetition, if there is any at all, and its issue is what Saint Paul called a new creation, a new being (2 Cor. 5:17).

In *Fear and Trembling* we detect the first sign of trouble in Kierkegaard's project, the first sign that the power of eternity might abolish the significance of time. Despite its brilliant portrait of the knight of faith, the paradigm of Kierkegaardian faith, the book is a flashing red alarm signalling trouble on the road ahead. It is every bit as troubling a book as it is a work of genius. The book appears on first reading to be a recipe for fanaticism – where someone who kills an innocent child is applauded as a hero of faith. The Nazis might have claimed they were on a divine mission to kill Jews, and religious terrorists of all kinds – Christian and Jewish, Muslim and Hindu – have always said they were doing God's work by killing one another. If one may kill one innocent child, why not many children, or an entire race of innocent people? That such an idea

contradicts all reason and human understanding is no objection if the distinguishing mark of faith is to proceed 'in virtue of the absurd' and to step outside communication with others and universal standards.

De Silentio anticipates this objection. The crucial thing from Silentio's point of view, 'the presupposition without which the whole thing becomes a misdeed', is that this sacrifice proceed from love not hatred, that Abraham loves Isaac with his whole soul. The Nazis would be required to love the Jews with all their hearts and prefer to give up their own lives rather than 'sacrifice' the Jews; terrorists of every stripe would be required to love their victims as they would their own children. Nonetheless, those cases would still stand *in principle* where someone really did love their spouse or child or neighbour, and really felt commanded by God to sacrifice them. In approving, even praising, such cases, Kierkegaard's argument is not only false but dangerous. In *Fear and Trembling* we see the first signs of a distorted conception of religion that emerges in the last years of his life, where the demands of God above are so overwhelming that they can completely annul the significance of life on earth. Instead of maintaining its tensions, the dialectic collapses. What goes ultimately amiss in Kierkegaard is that he believes temporal existence does not have the stuff, the substance, the wherewithal to withstand eternity if ever eternity makes an unconditional demand upon it, as God here demands the absurd of Abraham.

In interpreting *Fear and Trembling*, a lot turns on the expression 'in virtue of the absurd' that de Silentio uses in this extract and whether Kierkegaard is being led by his critique of Hegelian 'Reason' to embrace an outright irrationalism. For Hegel, what is real is rational and what is rational is real; the world is nothing but the unfolding of divine reason in space

and time. Kierkegaard's rejoinder to the Hegelians is a salient counter-example: the faith of Abraham, whose greatness lies in being willing to do something that makes no human sense. It is one thing if the 'absurd' simply means a 'marvel' that exceeds human reason, something of which an omnipotent God is capable but which is beyond our understanding, like making Sarah pregnant again at an advanced age. But it is quite another thing (and this is the problem with *Fear and Trembling*) to approve of a divine command to kill an innocent child, which seems to be absurd in a stronger sense, not simply exceeding reason but flatly contradicting all reason. To a modern reader this paradigmatic example of an act of faith, killing an innocent child, represents what de Silentio himself calls an 'appalling' violation of an inviolable law of morality, which makes its perpetrator a murderer from an ethical point of view. De Silentio holds that such a slaying is sometimes something that, all other precautions having been observed, God in all his eternal might and mystery might have some inscrutable reason to command. In following that command we would be heroes of faith. That is the high price of faith, and one would be willing to pay it only if one is convinced that life in time has no ultimate rights before God's eternity.

Kierkegaard could have eased the dilemma posed by the story of Abraham and Isaac had he not dismissed the results of historical biblical exegesis, then in its infancy, as pandering to an age of liberal Hegelian intellectualism and depriving faith of its cutting edge. From an historical-critical point of view, the story takes place in a time before the Mosaic law is given when the sacrifice of the primogenitum was not an uncommon practice. Abraham would have felt no need for silence; he could have explained himself to his contemporaries perfectly well, and they would have understood him. In his historical

context, Abraham would have been an ethical hero, willing to implement to the death a difficult but widely accepted practice. In that context, the more unusual thing is the *ending*, where God stays the sacrifice, signifying disapproval of child sacrifice, which the Hebrew storyteller is rejecting. So de Silentio has the whole thing backwards: the sacrifice of Isaac would have been understood, even admired, by Abraham's contemporaries; it is God's intervention against it that is more the 'marvel'. But for Kierkegaard that explanation is a cowardly way to duck what God requires of us.

Some readers have concluded that Kierkegaard's position here is so indefensible that we should fall back on the point that this is, after all, not his view, but that of the pseudonym. De Silentio has been ushered on stage to say his lines to show that the religious stage of existence also ends in a despair of its own, comparable to the despair by which the aesthetic and the ethical are beset. If that is so, then all three stages of existence end in contradiction, the entire ladder collapses, and the entirety of the pseudonymous production is an elaborate form of scepticism. However, the journals and the signed writings written before and after 1845 confirm that Kierkegaard held the views here expounded by de Silentio. It is Kierkegaard's project to show that a faith such as Abraham's is real faith, not despair. The true despair in Kierkegaard's view would be to take offence at the *horror religiosus*, that is, to reject the terrible thing God has asked of Abraham as requiring too high a price. For Kierkegaard, the only despair to be found in the religious stage of existence is a salutary despair in the ethical autonomy of a self-sufficient and purely human order that sets itself up over God. In that sense Kierkegaard's 'stages' may be seen as a highway of despair, like the way of the Cross, meant to expose the corruptibility of the immanent or worldly and temporal order,

in order to elicit absolute trust in the eternity, immutability and transcendence of God, the subject of his last religious discourse (on the unchangeability of God, 1855).

A more fruitful reading of *Fear and Trembling* was proposed by Jacques Derrida, who gave Kierkegaard's conception of the religious exception a postmodern sense. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida argued that instead of defending a religious exception to ethics, Kierkegaard's point is best served by defending the exception as itself an ethical category. Ethics may be redescribed in such a way that no ethical obligation may be reduced to the mechanical application of a universal rule, as if making ethical choices is like running a computer program. As a postmodern category, singularity implies the uniqueness of each and every being, not just the human person, thereby extending its application to animals and the natural world. In postmodernity Kierkegaard's category of the exception is widened beyond its religious scope – or perhaps it is better to say that his religious category is granted a wider sweep and significance. For it is just in virtue of its 'singularity' that each thing is inscribed in a field of aesthetic, ethical and religious transcendence that commands our respect, a transcendence that would honour the world God has created instead of regarding it as a place that has been blackened by God, the way a mother blackens her breast, to wean us for eternity, as Kierkegaard says at the beginning of *Fear and Trembling* (9–11).

5

TRUTH IS SUBJECTIVITY

When the question about truth is asked objectively, truth is reflected upon objectively as an object to which the knower relates himself. What is reflected upon is not the relation but that what he relates himself to is the truth, the true. If only that to which he relates himself is the truth, the true, then the subject is in the truth. When the question about truth is asked subjectively, the individual's relation is reflected upon subjectively. If only the how of this relation is in truth, the individual is in truth, even if he in this way were to relate himself to untruth . . .

Now, if the problem is to calculate where there is more truth . . . whether on the side of the person who objectively seeks the true God and the approximating truth of the God-idea or on the side of the person who is infinitely concerned that he in truth relate himself to God with the infinite passion of need – then there can be no doubt about the answer for anyone who is not totally botched by scholarship and science. If someone who lives in the midst of Christianity enters, with knowledge of the true idea of God, the house of God, the house of the true God, and

prays, but prays in untruth, and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of infinity, although his eyes are resting upon the image of an idol – where, then, is there more truth? The one prays in truth to God although he is worshipping an idol; the other prays in untruth to the true God and is therefore in truth worshipping an idol . . .

When subjectivity is truth, the definition of truth must also contain in itself an expression of the antithesis to objectivity, a memento of that fork in the road, and this expression will at the same time indicate the resilience of the inwardness. Here is such a definition of truth: *An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth*, the highest truth there is for an *existing* person. At the point where the road swings off (and where it is cannot be stated objectively, since it is precisely subjectivity), objective knowledge is suspended. Objectively he then has only uncertainty, but this is precisely what intensifies the infinite passion of inwardness, and truth is precisely the daring venture of choosing the objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite . . .

But the definition of truth stated above is a paraphrasing of faith. Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am able to comprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot do this, I must have faith. If I want to keep myself in faith, I must continually see to it that I hold fast the objective uncertainty, see to it that in the objective uncertainty I am 'out on 70,000 fathoms of water' and still have faith.

(*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*)[14]

This extract from the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the 'Philosophical Fragments'* (1845) articulates 'the truth that is true for me' (from the 1835 Gilleleie journal entry) as a philosophical theory. That 'truth is subjectivity' forms the theoretical centrepiece of Kierkegaard's thought. The upshot of the argument is to say that Christianity is a way to be, something to be lived, not a theory to be debated by the philosophers. At the end of the book, Kierkegaard himself steps from behind the curtain and declares the production over. He acknowledges himself to be the author of the pseudonyms, and so the author of these books in a legal and literary sense. Intending to take a parish in some remote part of the country, all that remains is actually to become a Christian.

But for a *Postscript* this is a big book, and the theory – that Christianity is not a theory – is quite long-winded, fully equipped with a generous supply of italics to boot, and all the while incessantly lampooning the garrulousness of German metaphysics. Is this book a ruse? The *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is three times the size of *Philosophical Fragments*, the book of which it is the 'postscript'. For an '*Unscientific Postscript*' it is very scientific and crafted with a fine sense of German architectonics, looking a lot like the very sort of 'logical system' it sets out to show cannot be had. Is this a jest, an elaborate satire on German metaphysics? If Climacus, a self-proclaimed humorist, succeeds, he fails; if he is right, his theory of subjective truth is objectively true. How then are we supposed to read this book?

In order to proceed we must first look to *Philosophical Fragments*, where Climacus posed the problem of whether our 'eternal happiness' (our life after death in heaven) can have an historical point of departure (be based upon some-

thing that happens in human history). Philosophy from Socrates to Hegel turns on a central presupposition, that truth is eternal, and that the philosopher is, as Climacus puts it, '*in the truth*', so that the task of philosophy is to wring it out, to make explicit the eternal truth that is already implanted in the philosopher's soul. What Climacus means may be seen in Plato's theory of recollection. Plato maintained that the soul already possesses the truth which it learned in a previous life, before its birth in the world, when it lived in eternity among the unchanging forms. When we are born, our souls fall from that upper world into our bodies, and the bodily incarnation causes the soul to forget what it has learned. Accordingly, to acquire knowledge during our life in time is to recollect what the soul already knows, having learned it in a previous existence. For Johannes Climacus, philosophy ever since Plato has in one way or another made the same assumption that the human mind somehow already possesses the truth and needs only to look within itself to find it. The truth, which is unchanging and eternal, is internal, already possessed by the soul.

But let us reverse this assumption: suppose that the philosopher does not possess the truth but needs to be given the truth? Suppose this whole human order is internally warped or wounded and that the only way things can be mended is from without, by a visitation by a higher power? Suppose the 'disciple' (the human being) is *'in the un-truth'*, that is, is deprived of eternal truth. Suppose the human mind is in need of help, requiring a 'teacher' who supplies the truth that the mind does not have and cannot give itself? Suppose instead of a teacher like Socrates who coaxed the eternal out from within us – Socrates said he was a 'mid-wife' who wrests the truth from his students by asking the right questions – we

require a teacher who authoritatively delivers it over to us ('you have heard it said . . . but I say to you . . .')? Truth is eternal, as Plato and the philosophers say, and upon the truth our eternal destiny rests. But since we who live in time do not possess and cannot raise ourselves up to the eternal by our own efforts, the question is: is it possible, and if so, what would it be like for the eternal truth to humble itself and come down to us, to come into time?

In short, the *Philosophical Fragments* ask, 'can there be an historical point of departure for our eternal happiness?' This question is then taken up by the *Postscript* to the '*Fragments*'. The *Fragments* are posing the biblical alternative to the Platonic assumption. Instead of assuming that the soul is possessed of the truth, the biblical assumption is that human nature is fallen and corrupted by original sin (the 'un-truth'). Hence the *Fragments* are describing how first sin and then its remedy, Christ, the authoritative healer of the soul and teacher of the truth, came into the world. But in the *Philosophical Fragments* Climacus would not name names and left it in the abstract. In the *Postscript* he names names and tell us in the concrete: that Christianity is the answer to the question of our eternal happiness. But the problem is that between the time of Christ's life and death on earth and the present generation of European Christianity a complication has set in. With the passage of time, Christianity fell victim to a 'misunderstanding', with the result that by the nineteenth century, this speculative age that is overrun by German metaphysics, Christianity has been mistaken as an objective rather than a subjective truth, as a speculative theory rather than a call to transform our lives existentially. That misunderstanding must be cleared up, which takes over 600 pages in the *Postscript*.

In using the expression 'eternal happiness' Climacus means life after death, eternal life with God in heaven, eternity in its fullest and most robust sense, whereas Abraham and Job were concerned with an earthly legacy, living on in one's offspring. But eternal happiness, the sort of truth Christianity promises, cannot be an 'objective' truth, because life requires quicker and more usable results than are available in the sphere of objectivity. Christianity is a historical religion, based upon the historical life and death of Jesus Christ, but no one will live long enough for the results of an objective-historical inquiry – 'the search for the historical Jesus' – to come in. At death the existing person needs an assurance about the meaning that Jesus holds for human life that is greater than that afforded by the results of scholarly research. On our deathbed we will have neither the time nor the taste to pore through the journals for the latest scholarly hypothesis about the historical Jesus or about the origins of the universe. Nor, if Christianity is a historical truth, will a historical matter ever be deduced from a speculative or metaphysical argument (Hegel), for no necessary and eternal truth will ever yield a single historical fact, just as knowing the timeless definition of a triangle will never tell us whether there are any real triangular things in the world. In short, if Christianity is the truth that is true for me, the truth for which I can live and die, then I will not live long enough for the results of objective thinking to come in. Christianity, if it is true at all, is a 'subjective' truth. But what is that?

In objective truth, the accent falls on the objective content of what you say (which Climacus calls the 'what'), so that if you get the objective content right (2 + 3 = 5) you are in the truth, no matter whether you are, in your personal subjectivity, a villain or an apostle. Nothing prevents a famous

mathematician from being an ethical scoundrel. The existential subject is accidental and remains a disinterested spectator. But in subjective – or 'existential' – truth, the accent falls on what Climacus calls the 'how', on the way the subject lives, the real life and 'existence' of the subject. Here, where 'subjectivity is truth', the subject is essential and passionately involved. In this case, even if what is said is objectively true – that God is love – if you are not subjectively transformed by that, if you do not personally have love in your heart, then you do not have the truth. A pagan worshipping an idol but with a heart full of love comes out ahead of a learned Christian theologian who can eloquently expound upon the nature of divine love but is a scoundrel in his personal life. The difference is between having an idea of the 'true God' and having a 'true *relationship to* God'. Here the how of the relationship is all.

Climacus's definition of subjective truth is a thinly disguised version of the definition of faith (the substance of things that are not seen), of which he distinguishes two kinds. As Plato recounts to us in the *Apology* and *Phaedo*, Socrates went to his death with outward coolness but inner passion. Socrates might easily have escaped from prison but, choosing not to break the laws of Athens, passed his last day discoursing on the immortality of the soul with his friends. He was objectively uncertain whether there was a life after death but he possessed an absolute inner assurance that a man who earnestly attempted to live a just life had nothing to fear from death. That we may call a natural faith, lodged firmly on a purely human plane. Socratic faith is a pagan prototype of a second faith, transpiring on higher ground, beyond the universally human, which turns on a degree of uncertainty so great as to reach a point of 'paradox'. Kierkegaard means that the Eternal (God) has come

into time (become human) in the absolute paradox of the Incarnation. Immortality, by contrast, is uncertain but it is plausible; it is not an absolute paradox. Even the faith of Abraham or Job in an earthly heritage is but a prototype of the paradox; they are the patriarchs of faith, but their faith pales compared to the paradox embraced by Christian faith.

Climacus does not consider the idea of a God-man to be a logical contradiction, like a square circle; it does not mean 'nonsense' (568). The paradox belongs to an ethico-religious order, not to a logical one; it is more like what St Paul calls a stumbling block (I Cor. 1:23) or a blasphemy, and Climacus clearly considers it more shocking even than the command to sacrifice one's son. It is a mind-numbing 'collision' that this man, who carries out humble and unmentionable bodily functions, is truly the Eternal One, the Most High, God Almighty. The Christianity Climacus holds up for us turns on the high orthodoxy of the Nicene Creed, 'true God and true man'.

Why does God not find a simpler, less paradoxical way to reveal himself? Precisely in order to repel the speculative philosophers, to defeat or deflect those who would turn Christianity into another theory. Precisely to prevent the misunderstanding that besets Christianity in a theoretical age, which has turned the wine of Christianity into the water of an objective truth drawn by German metaphysicians. Christianity is something to *do*, not a philosophical puzzle. It comes about not when someone affirms a creedal proposition, but when someone *does* something. It is a way to be witnessed, not a proposition to be proven. The description of the Christian paradox as 'absurd' is not a technical term in logic, but a scarecrow meant to chase away the philosophers. In principle, the Incarnation can be understood, the proof of which is that

God certainly understands it, but Climacus cannot understand it. Neither can we, and furthermore our present business is not to understand but to do it, to 'appropriate' it, which means to inscribe it in our life.

Climacus seeks to heighten the tensions that constitute the contradiction or the paradox, the objective uncertainty, as far as possible. He intends to raise the tension between objective uncertainty and subjective passion to its very highest pitch of subjectivity and existential truth, of 'inwardness'. The highest pitch of inwardness represents the height of religious faith. If aesthetic life is organized around enjoyment, and if ethical life is a more inward and active struggle for moral victory, Climacus proposes that the religious sphere of existence turns on *pathos*, a suffering that goes on in the very deepest recesses of inwardness. Of this inward suffering there are two degrees, constituting two kinds of religion – which he calls religiousness 'A' and 'B' – which constitute the concluding crescendo of the pseudonymous authorship.

In 'Religiousness A', the existing individual maintains an 'absolute relation to the absolute', that is, a relation of unconditional attachment to what is unconditionally important, while being detached in one's heart from every relative goal, that is, what is of merely relative or conditional importance. For example, in medieval monasticism, men and women dedicated their entire lives to the service of God, setting aside earthly and temporal goods. But monasticism is a lower stage of Religiousness A because it is too outward a manifestation of faith. The higher form is found in the inwardness of the Knight of Faith. The latter is an outwardly happily married fellow who masks a strictly inner detachment from the finite with a touch of humour. Such detachment is an exercise in suffering. By suffering, Climacus does not mean

an 'accidental' misfortune, like putting up with a bad back, with which someone may or may not be burdened. He means 'essential' suffering, which is necessary and unavoidable. It occurs even in the absence of external hardships and consists in being weaned away from the love of merely relative and conditional things. Instead of proposing religion as a relief or consolation for suffering, Climacus thinks that suffering forges the religious soul, sculpts it like an artist, carefully chipping away the illusions of the finite and relative, constituting a sign that assures us that the relation to what is absolutely and unconditionally important is in place. One humbly confesses that without God a man can do nothing, not even take a walk in the park. One concedes guilt, not the 'accidental' guilt that comes of tallying fourteen things we have done wrong, but 'essential', 'eternal' or religious guilt, which signifies the finitude of one's very being. Before God we are always in the wrong no matter how many things we get right. All this is a fearful thing, but it is not as stupid as thinking that it can all be superceded by German metaphysics, which reduces 'Christianity' to a mythical idea, a kind of picture or image, whose real truth is found only in Hegel's philosophy of the absolute spirit.

'Religiousness A' is a kind of universal-human religion, not a specifically Christian one. With the advent of 'Religiousness B', that is, Christianity, the tensions between our outer circumstances and inwardness are raised to infinity, taken to their highest pitch, by the absolute paradox of the God-man, that is, the Eternal in time. The 'dialectical' complication introduced by the paradox at the heart of Christianity accentuates the contradictions and the tensions, eliciting the existential leap. Whereas in Religiousness A, one sustains an absolute relation to the absolute, to God, in B (Christianity) one confronts the

God-made-man, the God come into time, which accentuates the paradox. In B, we base our entire eternal happiness on a distant event that, objectively speaking, is all but lost in the fog of historical time, which sharpens or accentuates the *pathos* or the suffering. Christian faith is based on an event in the past – the life and death of Jesus – about which there is no objective certainty. Here the immanent structure of 'guilt' (A) gives way to a more penetrating 'consciousness of sin' (B), whose removal requires the advent of the God-man; the immanent structure of 'suffering' (A) gives way to a deeper 'offence', which assaults the understanding (B). Religion B is woven from the fabric of 'transcendence', that is, of Christian revelation.

The pseudonymous literature concludes on this note, with a striking portrait of Christianity as a stumbling block to the philosophers, requiring a leap of faith that defies the rationalistic pretensions of Hegelian philosophy. Along with Marx and the 'Young Hegelians' who were his contemporaries, the works Kierkegaard produced between 1841 and 1845 set in motion a revolution in philosophy that has lasted to this day, one that set aside the abstractions of speculative metaphysics for an account of life in the concrete and aims at catching life in the existential situations in which it is actually lived. Nonetheless, as he says in his own name at the end of the *Postscript*, the pseudonymous authors do not so much make startling new proposals in their books as attempt to return to something old, trying to read 'in a more inward way' the 'original text' of human existence, 'the old familiar text handed down from the fathers'. (629–30).

6

PSEUDONYMITY

My pseudonymity or polynymity has not had an *accidental* basis in my *person* . . . but an *essential* basis in the *production* itself, which, for the sake of the lines and of the psychologically varied difference of the individualities, poetically required an indiscriminateness with regard to good and evil, brokenheartedness and gaiety, despair and overconfidence, suffering and elation, etc., which is ideally limited only by psychological consistency, which no factually actual person dares to allow himself or can want to allow himself in the moral limitations of actuality. What has been written, then, is mine, but only insofar as I, by means of audible lines, have placed the life-view of the creat*ing*, poetically actual individuality in his mouth, for my relation is even more remote than that of a poet, who *poetizes* characters and yet in the preface is *himself* the *author*. That is, I am impersonally or personally in the third person a *souffleur* [prompter] who has poetically produced the *authors*, whose *prefaces* in turn are their productions, as their *names* are also. Thus in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me. I have no opinion about them except as a third party, no knowledge of

their meaning except as a reader, not the remotest private relation to them, since it is impossible to have that to a doubly reflected communication . . . Thus I am indifferent, that is, what and how I am are matters of indifference, precisely because in turn the question, whether in my innermost being it is also a matter of indifference to me what and how I am, is absolutely irrelevant to this production . . . My facsimile, my picture, etc., like the question whether I wear a hat or a cap, could become an object of attention only for those to whom the indifferent has become important – perhaps in compensation because the important has become a matter of indifference to them.

In a legal and in a literary sense, the responsibility is mine, but, easily understood dialectically, it is I who have *occasioned* the audibility of the production in the world of actuality, which of course cannot become involved with poetically actual authors and therefore altogether consistently and with absolute legal and literary right looks to me . . . Therefore, if it should occur to anyone to want to quote a particular passage from the books, it is my wish, my prayer, that he will do me the kindness of citing the respective pseudonymous author's name, not mine . . .

My role is the joint role of being the secretary and, quite ironically, the dialectically reduplicated author of the author or the authors . . . but on the other hand I am very literally and directly the author of, for example, the upbuilding discourses and of every word in them . . . If anyone . . . has . . . *actually* fooled himself by being encumbered with my personal actuality instead of having the light, double reflected ideality of a poetically actual author to dance with . . . that cannot be truly charged to me . . .

(*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 625–7)[15]

The few pages Kierkegaard added to the *Postscript* in his own name in February 1846, from which the present extract is taken, became the source of endless debates in the literature.[16] Kierkegaard owns up to being the author of the pseudonymous works only in a legal and literary sense, like a playwright whose views should not be identified with the world-views he places in the mouths of his characters. Indeed, as the author of other authors, he says that he is more like a prompter from off stage, helping the characters remember their lines. His 'pseudonymity or polynymity', he tells us, is not a personality quirk on his part, but has 'an *essential* basis in the *production* itself' (*CUP*, 625). It is indispensable to saying the sort of thing he has to say. It is crucial that he be free to distance himself from these authors, each with a psychology and individuality of his own, at the very least because from some of them, like the amoral Johannes the Seducer, every 'factually existing person' should want to maintain a safe distance. But it is not only from the Seducer that he distances himself, for 'not a single word' of his is found in any of these books. If these books are cited, he asks his readers do him the courtesy of citing the name of the pseudonyms, not his own.

Given the unambiguous force and clarity with which Kierkegaard expresses himself here and in his own name, one would think that he would have been taken at his word. But that is far from the case. Kierkegaard's fame rests on the fact that his most famous readers, like Heidegger, simply ignored his wishes. The closest Heidegger came to honouring Kierkegaard's request was in not citing Kierkegaard at all. His *Being and Time* (1927), arguably the single most important work of continental European philosophy written in the twentieth century, rests on a shameless 'ransacking' (Poole) or appropriation of the main insights of the pseudonyms, with a few parsimonious footnotes

that largely brush off Kierkegaard as a minor player. Heidegger takes over the fundamental tendencies of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works, formalizes them in more abstract terms, and then pronounces them 'grounded' in his own ontology. Although *Being and Time* was marked by other ontological and phenomenological concerns, it was mainly its 'existential' motifs that made it an instant and sensational success and propelled Heidegger into an international celebrity. After the war, *Being and Time* became the bible of the French Existentialists, who were led back to Kierkegaard through Heidegger. The Absolute Paradox that stops philosophical speculation in its tracks was transcribed by Albert Camus into the portrait of the 'absurd man', the figure in *The Myth of Sisyphus* who, by denying that life has some final meaning, is empowered to affirm its passing moments. Camus dismissed the movement of 'faith' in Kierkegaard as a failure of nerve. Sartre, too, contributed an interesting essay on the concept of the 'single individual' to an anniversary celebration of Kierkegaard's legacy.[17]

It mattered not a whit to Heidegger, Camus or Sartre that the breakthrough category of 'existence' was made in the name of the pseudonym Climacus, who protested that he is not 'a devil of a fellow in philosophy' out to 'create a new trend' (621). Had the matter of the pseudonymous authorship been pressed upon them, they very likely would have replied that it was just a literary conceit. After all, if the solution to a mathematical problem comes to us in a dream, it is no less a solution. Even Nicholas Copernicus, a devout monk, did not accept the 'Copernican theory' as *true* – for truth 'brother Nicholas' relied on the Scriptures – but treated it as a shorthand device useful to mariners. But that in no wise detracted from the force of its truth. If Mozart, having composed 'Don

Giovanni', then 'revoked' it, declaring it was a musical joke, we would still have 'Don Giovanni'. In the matter of masterpieces, you cannot un-ring the bell. Just so, no matter who signs his name as the author, what is said by the pseudonyms about the category of existence 'speaks for itself'.

Nor did Kierkegaard's pseudonyms matter a whit to theologians like Karl Barth. What mattered to them was the very Christian faith that the philosophers had so massively and adroitly neutralized in these books. After all, one could hardly forget that Kierkegaard was a self-described religious author. The highest reaches of 'existence' or 'existential passion' lay for him in the 'passion of faith', or the 'leap of faith' described so memorably in the *Postscript* and *Fear and Trembling*. The 'absolute paradox' posed by the God-man was the Archimedean point in Kierkegaard's soul. The evidence for this is clear. To every work of the left hand written in the period of the pseudonyms (1841–5) there corresponded a work of the right, an 'edifying' or (in the maladroit Hong translation) 'upbuilding' discourse, signed by Kierkegaard himself, which made clear the ethico-religious point of its pseudonymous sibling in the manner of a 'direct' communication. Kierkegaard can be clearly inserted into a theological line that extends from the Pauline letters through Augustine and mediated to him by Luther, which accentuated the theological motifs of fallenness, guilt, sin, grace and faith, on the one hand, and the radical transcendence of God in eternity, on the other. Kierkegaard, if not exactly a theologian, was at least an intensely religious author, a self-interpretation that grew stronger within him as time went by. In *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*, he even tried to make it look like that was his idea from the start. The philosophers would not necessarily have disagreed with the

theologians about that, but they considered this theological streak a limitation in Kierkegaard's thought from which they had liberated it.

Readers of Kierkegaard face an 'Either/Or': Either Kierkegaard the theologian or Kierkegaard the philosopher. Either way, it seems, Kierkegaard would regret it. For either way, one is ignoring Kierkegaard's request to leave him out of the picture. This debate changed dramatically in the 1970s under the impact of the radical literary theory called 'deconstruction' developed by Jacques Derrida (1930–2004). Then, and almost for the first time, a school of readers began heeding Kierkegaard's insistence that he himself was no more than the '*occasion*' of the appearance of these books, responsible for their 'production in the world of actuality', and that there is 'not a single word by me' to be found in them (*CUP*, 626–7).

This position was pushed as far as possible by Roger Poole, a Derridean critic who criticized what he called 'blunt' reading, by which he meant having a tin ear for the textuality and literary quality of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous texts and treating them as so many straightforward manuals of philosophy or theology. 'We have to begin to learn how to read Kierkegaard', Poole wrote.[18] How to *read* Kierkegaard – as neither philosopher nor theologian – but as a *writer*. A sensitive reading would show that the pseudonyms were not the same as Kierkegaard, that they were not the same as one another, and that they made no unambiguous and easily summarized point. The 'one central concern' of Poole's book was to propose that it is 'high time' that we take Kierkegaard at his word, that 'nothing said by the pseudonyms should be taken to be his own view'.[19] In my opinion Poole goes too far. As Joel Rasmussen recently pointed out, Kierkegaard said that he took no position on what the pseudonyms were saying

'except as a reader' but there is nothing to prevent a reader from agreeing with what he reads. Any fair-minded reading of the whole corpus, of the journals and the books signed in his own name, indicates that Kierkegaard held many of the views expressed by the pseudonyms, some of which are to be found verbatim in his *Journals*.[20]

Still, Poole has a point. For the blunt readers are blunting something. They are dulling the distinction between the poetic ideality of the author and the existential actuality of the reader. Authors pose to the readers, to existing persons – to everyone from Kierkegaard to us – the task of actualization, of making the leap, of converting into reality what transpires among them as pure 'poetic' ideality. A blunt reading blunts the Socratic-Christian irony and the religious humour with which Kierkegaard approaches this gap, which he describes here as the 'distancing ideality' of the 'dance' with 'the light, doubly reflected ideality of a poetically actual author'. The play's the thing – the poetic play of the pseudonymous production – not Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard dangles before the reader a dance of possibilities, of world views articulated by several players, into whose play he seeks to draw the reader. But it is the task of the reader to choose for oneself, to decide, to exist – which means to actualize the ideal, to convert these idealities into the currency of existence, to make the leap. The point Poole himself blunts is that this also holds for Kierkegaard himself *as a reader*, as one charging himself with the task of becoming a Christian, like a physician who must follow his own advice – or like the author of a book on dieting!

Think of the distinction between an 'author' and a 'reader' as the difference between two different 'positions', an ideal sending position and a real receiver position. Seen thus, even Søren

Aabye Kierkegaard, as a real person responsible for his own life, is stationed in the position of a reader. Kierkegaard too is a 'receiver' of these words about becoming a Christian, not an author or an authority, and as far removed from actually being a Christian as the next chap, which is why he said that these books were a part of his own education, a point a lot of authors will appreciate. (Physician – heal thyself. Author – read thyself.) The 'author' is a position stationed in ideality, and his actuality is not important. We may be uncertain about the real author's birth name, whether 'Homer' is one or many people, a pen name or pseudonym, etc. The deployment of a pseudonym simply intensifies or makes palpable something that is structurally true of any 'author'. The real author may be considered as an empirical, psychological, historical personality, a redactor of an ongoing tradition of stories handed down orally, as a real or efficient cause of the books, the person to whom the royalty checks are mailed. Or an 'author' may be considered *as such*, as a 'position' from which ideal possibilities issue, while 'we' occupy the 'readerly position', a position always stationed in 'existence'.

Kierkegaard sought to negotiate the gap between the two positions and to focus attention on the real difficulty of actually becoming a Christian. This he did by having Climacus 'introduce' the age to Christianity, not the way the manuals do, by offering an easy summary, but by drawing the reader into the task itself, not by making it seem easy but by underlining its authentic difficulty (381). Like Socrates, who claimed only to know that he did not know, Kierkegaard's sole advantage over the age, if any, was at least to have recognized that he had not got as far as Christianity, which is the most difficult thing of all, while the age was busy deluding itself that it had moved beyond Christianity.

Of course, in some ways his pseudonymity was an ill-conceived strategy which drew more attention to him personally by stirring up a controversy that would otherwise not have taken place. He had used all the 'evasive dialectical' skills at his command to keep his 'personal actuality', his 'private particularity', out of the picture. But an 'inquisitive part of the reading public' had insistently tried to draw it back in (628). Furthermore, every one of his books is profoundly autobiographical, and his own life is sprawled across nearly every page, so that his own person begs to be the first place we turn for light. But a first reading that gets its bearings by following an autobiographical reference should not become definitive and end up blocking the way to the wider point that is at stake, which is that single individuals must each find their own way.

In 'An Understanding with the Reader', the Appendix added in the name of Johannes Climacus, which appears just before Kierkegaard's 'Explanation', Climacus says he longs for 'the teacher of the ambiguous art of thinking about existence and existing'. The ambiguity to which he refers is the difficulty the teacher faces in moving the individual from 'thinking' to 'existing'. That requires a teacher who runs the risk of becoming 'an intervention in another person's personal freedom' (620). Kierkegaard recognizes the ambiguity of writing a book about Christianity that says that Christianity is not to be found in a book, that it is entirely between the individual and God. If the reader believes the author – if the reader rushes out into the street shouting that he has found the book that answers the question of Christianity – he has *eo ipso* misunderstood the book. For the book says that everything is found in the relationship between the individual and God. It was not the author's purpose so to interfere with his reader's

life or to become an authority for the individual. The only authority is God. Where the Catholics write a book and then secure an *imprimatur* from the bishop, Climacus writes a book and then adds a revocation. He hopes for a reader who 'can understand that to write a book and to revoke it is not the same as refraining from writing it, that to write a book that does not demand to be important for anyone is still not the same as letting it be unwritten'. (621) 'Therefore, let no one bother to appeal to it, because one who appeals to it has *eo ipso* misunderstood it. To be an authority is much too burdensome an existence for a humorist.' The author subsists in the lightness of ideality and cannot be weighed down by the gravity of being.

Kierkegaard's lifelong goal was to find the truth that is true for him. But as an *author* who has *published* his books, it was to do no less for his readers. Success in this project would consist of prodding or agitating his readers to somehow find the truth that is true for them. He wanted to address that secret inner chamber where the single individual is absolutely alone before God, because when one is alone with God one is alone in the most intense and interior sense, not simply alone in the mathematical sense of being solitary or a *solus ipse*. God is present there not in such a way as to disturb the solitude but so as to *constitute* true and authentic solitude. Having set aside all the distractions and diversions that press in from the world, we close the door and confront ourselves. That is why Kierkegaard elsewhere advised reading his books alone and out loud.[21] The ancient Augustinian formula 'before God' (*coram deo*) is Kierkegaard's primal scene: so much God/so much self. He himself as a religious author is the third man out, one man too many in this primal scene, and so he must make himself as light and airy a thing as possible. By writing

under a pseudonym, he was trying to be invisible. The reader, on the other hand, has the parallel task of how to read such a book, for the reader must not be merely reading a book but coming face to face with himself, before God. It is like a sermon on Sunday morning: one hears each word from the pastor as if it were coming from God and directed solely to oneself. At this primordial scene Kierkegaard himself merely assists, as an occasion, a humorist, an ironist who is here one minute and gone the next. One who dares to write about becoming Christian cannot be like other writers, an authority, a heavyweight 'objective' author, like a world historian. He must be like a ghost, light and airy. Objective truths admit in principle of *direct* communication: the logician puts the proof on the board. But subjective truths require indirection, even seduction, or ghosts that haunt us, whispering words that elicit or awaken a movement in the freedom of the reader, which is more like the art of the friend or counsellor or the homilist. Still, it should not go unnoticed that it would, in fact, be impossible for any communication, if it is to be an effective *communication*, to ignore the dynamics of indirection, which is why there is a 'qualitative difference' also between good logic teachers and boring ones. Hence even the works signed in his own name require a certain discretion and indirection.

The delicate communicative art lies in what Jacques Derrida calls the paradox of the gift: knowing how to give a gift in such a way as not to create a feeling of dependence in the recipient. The task is to help readers find their own independence and freedom – without acquiring a dependence upon the author. If the readers stand on their own with the author's help, then they do not stand on their own. So the author's help must be invisible, and the reader cannot know

that the author has done anything. The task for the reader, then, is: 'to stand by oneself – through another's help'.[22] In this little 'dash', says Kierkegaard, 'infinity's thought is contained in a most ingenious way, and the greatest contradiction is surmounted'. We see the 'single individual' standing; more we cannot see. The help is hidden behind the dash. Kierkegaard here nods to the 'noble rogue' of antiquity, Socrates, who understood that 'the highest one human being can do for another is to educate him into freedom, help him to stand by himself', which means that the helper must make himself anonymous, invisible, nothing at all (276). Just as it is the mother who gives birth, not the midwife, so it is in the transaction between the individual and God in Christianity that the soul is reborn, but not by anything the religious author has done. The help the author gives 'infinitely vanishes in the God-relationship'. (278)

In a piece unpublished in his life time, *The Point of View of My Work as an Author* (1848), Kierkegaard elaborated upon the Socratic analogy. Just as the wisdom of Socrates was to know that he did not know, Kierkegaard's advantage was to understand that authentic Christian life is infinitely difficult, a rare and costly item, while his contemporaries thought that in a Christian land everyone was a Christian and Christianity could be had on the cheap. They had all been baptized, they had Christian names, they observed Christian feasts, they sang Christian hymns and they were certainly not Hindus or Muslims. So Kierkegaard had first to convince these Christians that they were *not* Christian while not positioning himself as a Christian for them to follow. (It would have almost been easier for him if Denmark were a missionary land that had never heard of Christianity.) The problem of his authorship is to prod people into realizing that they are *not* who they think

they are and that they must *become* what they believe they already are, and furthermore to do so completely on their *own*, not because he had prodded them into doing it. Kierkegaard's idea was to be God's Socrates, a Christian midwife assisting at a Christian rebirth, silently stealing away from a scene that transpires in secret between the individual and the grace of God.

In the *Postscript*, an impressive work of philosophy, Kierkegaard ironically engages the philosophers on their own turf, poking fun at the great Hegelian system of philosophy but all the while addressing it in its own terms, being more German than the German philosophers, to whom he is saying the following: Were you to turn the problem of Christianity into an objective-philosophical one, you would end up having to invent new categories like existence and the single individual, just as Climacus does. That Climacus does so is a sign that Christianity is not at bottom a philosophical problem. Therefore, stop thinking that Christianity is a speculative conundrum, as if it were one of Zeno's paradoxes, and – *become a Christian.*

Kierkegaard did all this in such a searching, felicitous and fetching way as to provide the contemporary world with its first good example – Nietzsche would be the second one – of what might be called anti-philosophical philosophy, or what we today call 'post-modern' philosophy, where 'modern' meant an excessively rational or, as Kierkegaard would say, 'objective' way of thinking (Nietzsche called it the 'spirit of gravity'). Instead of putting philosophy behind him once and for all, he produced a paradigm switch that revolutionized philosophy. His attack on traditional philosophy produced a new philosophy, philosophy-under-attack, one that in Kierkegaard's case dislodges philosophy from speculation and

lodges it more deeply into the tortured texture of concrete human experience than was heretofore possible. He launched one of the central projects of contemporary philosophy, returning the attention of philosophers to the concreteness of life as it is actually lived before it is distorted by the lens of reflection. Kierkegaard invented a new philosophical discourse, one that he himself treated with ironic distance and unmistakable humour by feeding his best lines to humourists. But no major philosophical movement that would emerge in twentieth-century continental European thought – from 'existentialism' to 'deconstruction' – would stand free of his influence.

7

THE PRESENT AGE

For a long time the basic tendency of our modern age has been toward levelling by way of numerous upheavals; yet none of them was levelling because none was sufficiently abstract but had a concretion of actuality . . . For levelling really to take place, a phantom must first be raised, the spirit of levelling, a monstrous abstraction, an all-encompassing something that is nothing, a mirage – and this phantom is *the public*. Only in a passionless but reflective age can this phantom develop with the aid of the press, when the press itself becomes a phantom. There is no such thing as a public in spirited, passionate, tumultuous times . . . [Then] there are parties, and there is concretion. The public is a concept that simply could not have appeared in antiquity . . . Only when there is no strong communal life to give substance to the concretion will the press create this abstraction 'the public', made up of unsubstantial individuals who are never united or never can be united in the simultaneity of any situation or organization and yet are claimed to be a whole. The public is a corps, outnumbering all the people together, but this corps can never be called for inspection; indeed it

cannot even have so much as a single representative, because it is itself an abstraction . . . Contemporaneity with actual persons, each of whom is someone, in the actuality of the moment and the actual situation gives support to the single individual. But the existence of a public creates no situation and no community. After all, the single individual who reads is not a public, and then gradually many individuals read, perhaps all do, but there is no contemporaneity. The public may take a year and a day to assemble, and when it is assembled it still does not exist . . . To adopt the same opinion as the public is a deceptive consolation, for the public exists only *in abstracto* . . . A generation, a nation, a general assembly, a community, a man still have a responsibility to be something, can know shame for fickleness and disloyalty, but a public remains the public . . . The public is not a people, not a generation, not one's age, not a congregation, not an association, not some particular persons, for all these are what they are only by concretions. Yes, not a single of these is essentially engaged in any way . . . Composed of someones such as these, of individuals in the moments when they are nobodies, the public is a kind of colossal something, an abstract void and vacuum that is all and nothing . . . The public is all and nothing, the most dangerous of all powers and the most meaningless . . . The category 'public' is reflection's mirage delusively making the individuals conceited, since everyone can arrogate to himself this mammoth, compared to which the concretions of actuality seem paltry . . . together with the passionlessness and reflectiveness of the age, the abstraction 'the press' . . . gives rise to the abstraction's phantom, 'the public', which is the real leveller . . . Anyone who has read the ancient authors knows how many things an emperor could think up to beguile the

> time. In the same way the public keeps a dog for its amusement. The dog is the contemptible part of the literary world. If a superior person shows up . . . the dog is goaded to attack him, and then the fun begins . . . And the public is unrepentant, for after all it was not the public, it was the dog . . . In the event of a lawsuit, the public would say: The dog is not mine; the dog has no owner.
>
> (*Two Ages*, pp. 90–95)[23]

Kierkegaard lived at the beginning of the age of mass media, which in his day meant the press. The opening in 1843 in Copenhagen of 'Tivoli', one of the first modern amusement parks and something of the first Disney World, also did not escape his attention.[24] Like Nietzsche and Heidegger later on, Kierkegaard was worried that the effect of the media and of modern egalitarian institutions that aimed at emancipating the masses would be what he called 'levelling'. He feared that the existing individual would be lost in a cloud of anonymity and by means of large numbers (a 'crowd') enabled to escape what each individual faces singly in his own life – a personal decision (either/or). The public – which Heidegger famously called the 'they' – is a surveillance system keeping watch over everything exceptional, monitoring it for everything singular, which it then edits out. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger were politically conservative, even ultra-conservative, thinkers, alerting us to the downside and the dangers posed by democratic institutions. Thomas Jefferson thought a democratic people cannot be both free and stupid, from which he concluded that we had better provide for the public education of the people. These thinkers concluded, like Plato, that we should forget about democracy and leave the government

to the educated few. To his credit, however, towards the end of his life Kierkegaard started to see the egalitarian upshot of the New Testament, which it could be argued was the real import of his concern with the 'single individual', or 'poor existing spirit'.[25]

With almost perfect prescience, Kierkegaard envisaged the corruption of real ('concrete') institutions whose policies are dictated by the invisible dictatorship of an 'abstract' phantom 'public'. While he was not yet familiar with politicians who base their decisions on public opinion polls, he did have a good idea of the corruption of writing, when the press and the publishing industry feed the appetite of the public for gossip, scandal, sex and violence instead of pursuing thoughtful journalism and serious literature. There are pages of Kierkegaard that could appear verbatim as an opinion column in tomorrow's *New York Times.*

The extract which opens this chapter is taken from a long book review. At the beginning of 1846, just after the *Postscript* was delivered to his publishers, Kierkegaard started a fight with the *Corsair*, a highly popular weekly paper of political and cultural opinion and notorious for its biting satires. In return the *Corsair* submitted him to a merciless ridicule that went on for two months and included painful cartoons caricaturing his physical appearance. Kierkegaard convinced himself it would be perceived as a cowardly admission of defeat were he to retreat to a parsonage under such fire. He resolved to continue his life as a writer but of book reviews only and in this way to abide by the decision to conclude the authorship with the *Postscript*. But this, the first such review, quickly turned into a book (and thereafter the resolve was abandoned) that culminated in an attack on the levelling tendency of the age, singling out the press as a particular villain.

Thus the second authorship, consisting of works signed largely in his own name, was launched.

The review is of Madame Thomasine Gyllembourg's novel *Two Ages*, which contrasts a revolutionary age with the present static one (on the eve of the political revolutions sweeping Europe in 1848). A revolutionary age – the French Revolution; Napoleon striding Europe on horseback; Martin Luther nailing his ninety-five theses to the door at Wittenberg – is marked by enthusiasm, passion, daring, decisiveness and heroism – while the present age has been enervated by an excess of reflection and deliberation. This shows up in the three distinctive features of the age. Instead of transforming things from the ground up, the present age leaves them standing by a sleight of hand Kierkegaard calls 'ambiguity', which makes it look like action was taken precisely when it was not. Instead of admiring genuine heroes, a reflective age is imprisoned in envy and resentfully pronounces rash anyone who dares to be a hero. Finally, the present age makes every effort to level or suppress the exceptional individual, to stifle decisive action and real upheaval. If the ancient world generated leaders, modernity ushers in the public, which means the illusion that what one is not individually – namely, decisive – might be made up for by large numbers, by adding nobodies together, which is like adding zeroes before a number rather than after it. The masses are a kind of arithmetical mistake, as if strength were achieved by adding up the weak, or beauty by adding up the ugly, or a considered judgement by multiplying mouths that blather pure drivel (106).

The defining characteristic of the public, the subject of this extract, which is the instrument of levelling, is that it is an 'abstraction' and not a concrete individual, a collection of individuals or a real institution. In a revolutionary age, there

are not only great leaders but also concrete communities galvanized by these great individuals, who form an organic unity, are capable of collective action and assume responsibility for their choices. But the public is really no one, nobody, and completely irresponsible. The 'public' is a unique feature of modern life produced by the impersonal technological means of communication at our disposal. The mechanical reproduction of writing in the press gives rise to an amorphous 'public opinion', which Heidegger described as what 'they say' (*on dit, man sagt*). Public opinion is a whole of which no one will confess being a part, an opinion that holds sway but is held by *no one in particular*, so that the public is in a real sense 'no one', even as someone whose views are entirely shaped by public opinion is devoid of any self or individuality. The public exercises a tyranny, compared by Kierkegaard to a decadent Roman Emperor who amuses himself by keeping dogs to attack slaves. The emperor is the public and the dog is the press. When the dog attacks we are all amused, and when the dog is said to be excessively cruel, we say it's not our dog, and if the dog is put down for excessive cruelty, we all say (publicly) that we agree – 'even the subscribers', Kierkegaard adds.

The levelling rule of the public variously 'annuls the principle of contradiction'. The language of the public is 'chatter', which annuls the distinction between having something to say and saying it, when speech is what is required, or knowing how to keep silent, which is a mark of inwardness. The chatterers do not keep silent but neither do they succeed in saying anything, despite all the talk. Authentic silence is highly communicative in itself, and when it is broken, the sparing use of words is even more significant. But with chatter, the more words, the less actually gets said; the more

'extensivity' (the more garrulous), the less intensivity (authentic speech). The public also annuls the distinction between form and content, so that instead of having principles that grow out of causes in which one is passionately engaged, one dispassionately does things in which one does not personally believe, but only 'on principle'. Kierkegaard here criticizes a basic tenet of liberalism, which puts procedure before substance, defending another's right to say or do something of which one 'personally' disapproves. The public also annuls the distinction between hiddenness and revelation by speaking out without allowing time for the inner ripening essential to genuine expression. Finally, the public annuls the distinction between subjective and objective truth, so that one ventures a view about anything, having picked up an opinion from the latest newspaper. Instead of words issuing from the inner heart, the public hears what 'they say', what Kierkegaard describes a kind of 'abstract noise', like the rattling of a machine. It is no surprise that people are more well-informed – there are handbooks for everything from Hegelian metaphysics to making love – but what is missing from this extensivity is the intensive passion of subjective truth, that is, taking action. When someone actually does take action, it is greeted with a storm of criticism, with envy and resentment, but not without first pointing out that one knew all along what was to be done, the mere difference being that one did not do it!

Nietzsche made very much the same diagnosis of the nineteenth-century European bourgeoisie, but he blamed Christianity for the problem, its 'slave morality' having given the aristocracy a bad conscience. Had Nietzsche said 'Christendom' – a sociological category not a religious one – rather than 'Christianity', Kierkegaard would have agreed. For

Nietzsche, the antidote to the levelling tendencies of the nineteenth century was art, especially the tragic art of the ancient Greeks. But for Kierkegaard it was found in religious passion, the passionate leap of faith made by the single individual.

For both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, the only real antidote to the dumbing down of bourgeois life is the intensity of a passionate singularity. But Nietzsche regarded such exotic singularities as the fortuitous and fragile outcome of a constellation of cosmic forces, like a piece of cosmic luck. For Kierkegaard that is a purely pagan and aesthetic formula (exactly what Nietzsche intended); for him singularity is an event of inwardness, of standing alone before God. The difference between Nietzsche and Kierkegaard is the difference between pagan passion and Christian passion, a lucky roll of the cosmic dice and divine grace, impersonal forces and a personal one, in a word, between Heraclitus and Luther. That opposition has spawned two lines of what is today called 'postmodernism', the one – very roughly – leading from Kierkegaard to Levinas and Derrida, the other from Nietzsche to Foucault and Deleuze. I say 'roughly' because *any* version of postmodernism would be critical of the thoroughgoing 'inwardness' of Kierkegaardian subjectivity, which postmodern critics treat as one of the fatally flawed axioms of modernity. Postmodern writers criticize the notion of interior consciousness, independent of the social, linguistic and even unconscious forces that have shaped it in advance.

Kierkegaard concludes with a helpful gloss on 'indirect' communication, which makes clear that every religious communication must be more or less indirect, and that this is not confined to the pseudonyms. It has to do with devising a strategy of non-invasive discursive intervention, whether the discourse is signed in one's own name or not. Pseudonymity

is only one way to use indirection. For the most part, now, Kierkegaard wrote in his own name, relying on his right hand, trying to establish his identity as a religious writer – somewhere in between C. S. Lewis and Heidegger – lest he be remembered primarily as the author of 'A Diary of a Seducer'. Now is the time to wage the 'battle' referred to in the Gilleleie journal entry in his own name. But enough of this, Kierkegaard concludes (after a book review now more than one hundred printed pages) – lest his words add to the banter of the age. Each individual must work out his own salvation, singly before God.

The analyses undertaken by Kierkegaard in *The Present Age* provide one of the earliest and most incisive looks at the ambiguity of cultural life in a technological age. The mechanical reproduction of writing made it possible to put printed books in the hands of more and more people and it eventually led to daily newspapers, where a free press is supposed to make for an informed public. By the same token, the mechanical reproduction of paintings, of music and of 'motion' pictures put the arts at the disposal of a wider public. When mechanical reproduction is superceded by the electronic reproduction of digitalized words and images, the powers of reproduction increase exponentially, confirming Heidegger's remark that in the age of technology the world itself is more and more being replaced by a 'picture' of the world.

Kierkegaard could not have seen all this coming but he was acutely sensitive to the dangers that were in the making even while discounting whatever advantages it might afford. In the *Postscript* Climacus mocked the opening of Tivoli as a bald invitation to distraction and diversion whose success is achieved at the cost of 'truth as inwardness in existence' and whose attractions provide amusement in exchange for 'a more incorruptible

joy in life' (*Postscript*, 286). He had no taste for the democratic possibilities offered by the new technology, for taking cultural life out of the hands of an aristocratic elite and putting it in the hands of the people. For him, the 'people' meant the 'public', which he treated with scorn. He was rightly worried that writers – and in a democracy the politicians – would appeal to the worst side of the 'people', whose appetites he compared to a mad Roman emperor. He was troubled by the capacity of the mass media to ridicule and abolish what is different and to substitute a life already hammered out and shaped for us by the prevailing ethos for a life lived individually, idiosyncratically and passionately.

It was the quintessence of modern bourgeois life – its effort to make everything safe and easy – that concerned Kierkegaard. That concern that was captured in Johannes Climacus's whimsical explanation of how he became an author (*Postscript,* 186–7). Everyone in nineteenth-century Europe is making things easier, Climacus muses. Wherever we look there are railroads, omnibuses, steamships, telegraphs, newspapers and even handbooks explaining how to read Hegel. But if everyone is making things easier, what other contribution to humankind remains for him than to make things harder? Is not the true difficulty we face in the modern age that all the difficulty is being removed? Is not the real danger that we are eliminating all the danger and the risk from life? Kierkegaard worried that our lives were becoming safe, small and mediocre, that existence was being robbed of its depth and individuality, inundated by a flood of amusements, conveniences, and ready-made opinions. But if life in the present age is menaced by this dangerous ease and thoughtlessness, his own vocation as author must be to restore life to its original difficulty.

8

LOVE

'*You* Shall Love the Neighbour [*sic*].'

Just look at the world that lies before you in all its variegated multifariousness; it is like looking at a play, except that the multifariousness is much, much greater. Because of his dissimilarity, every single one of these innumerable individuals is something particular, represents something particular, but essentially he is something else. Yet this you do not get to see here in life; here you see only what the individual represents and how he does it. It is just as in the play. But when the curtain falls on the stage, then the one who played the king and the one who played the beggar, etc. are all alike; all are one and the same – actors. When at death the curtain falls on the stage of actuality . . . then they, too, are all one, they are human beings. All of them are what they essentially were, what you did not see because of the dissimilarity that you saw – they are human beings.

The theatre of art is like a world under a magic spell. But just suppose some evening all the actors became confused in a common absentmindedness so that they thought they actually were what they represented. Would this not be what we

might call, in contrast to the spell of the dramatic arts, the spell of an evil spirit, a bewitchment? Similarly, what if under the spell of actuality (for we are indeed all under a spell, each one conjured into his dissimilarity) our fundamental ideas became confused so that we thought we essentially are what we represent? Alas, is this not just the way it is? We seem to have forgotten that the dissimilarity of earthly life is just like an actor's costume, or just like a traveller's cloak, so that each one individually should be on the watch and take care to have the outer garment's fastening cords loosely tied and, above all, free of tight knots so that in the moment of transformation the garment can be cast off easily . . . But, alas, in the life of actuality one laces the outer garment of dissimilarity so tight that it completely conceals the fact that this dissimilarity is an outer garment, because the inner glory of equality never or very rarely shines through as it continually should and ought.

Yet if someone is truly to love his neighbour, it must be kept in mind at all times that his dissimilarity is a disguise . . . From the beginning of the world, no human being exists or has existed who is the neighbour in the sense that the king is the king, the scholar the scholar, your relative your relative – that is, in the sense of exceptionality or, what amounts to the same thing, in the sense of dissimilarity – not every human being is the neighbour. In being king, beggar, rich man, poor man, male, female, etc., we are not like each other – therein we are indeed different. But in being the neighbour we are all unconditionally like each other. Dissimilarity is temporality's method of confusing that marks every human being differently, but the neighbour is eternity's mark – on every human being.

(*Works of Love*, pp. 86–9)[26]

As a 'cultural critic', Kierkegaard criticized the newly emerging culture of technological systems of communication. But as a Christian, he could not let that be the last word. He could never be complicit with a contempt for 'everyman', for common people are the stuff of the Kingdom of God and they command the special attention of Jesus. If he insisted that each individual stand alone before God, he did not neglect the duty of Christian love that each individual must bear for their neighbour. There is another kind of levelling or equality, the Christian equality of each one before God. In *Works of Love*, from which this extract is taken, we hear almost the opposite of what we have been hearing up to now: the differences ('dissimilarities') are costumes and underneath is the same, the universal-human. Kierkegaard has shifted his perspective. There was a Pietist streak in Kierkegaard, who constantly argued that the simple but heartfelt religiousness of ordinary people is not at a disadvantage vis-à-vis 'reflection', that is, the sophistication of speculative philosophy. So Kierkegaard carefully distinguished the 'basest kind of levelling', which reduced individuals to the lowest common denominator, from another and higher kind: 'Eternal life is also a kind of levelling, and yet it is not so, for the denominator is this: to be an essentially human person in the religious sense.'[27] The levelling that is effected by eternal life points to our highest common denominator, the irreducible dignity of each one before God. Kierkegaard's contempt for the homogenizing equalization effected by the public is to be distinguished from a deeper or higher equalization, where no matter what our outer circumstances, we are, each one of us, taken singly, absolutely equal – before God:[28]

> Christianly, every human being (the single individual), unconditionally every human being, once again, unconditionally every human being, is equally close to God – how close and equally close? – is loved by him. Thus there is equality, infinite equality, between human beings.

What everyone has in common, no matter what their station in life, is that each one is called to a unique one-to-one relationship with God, rather in the way each and every point on a circumference has a one-to-one relationship with the centre from which each point is equally distant. Equality (equal distance) and individuality go hand in hand. This deeper universality is identical with authentic individuality before God, and it is fundamentally different from the cowing of individuals into conformity with one another by the power of the public. Human beings are superior to animals not only because of a universal specific difference, but because:

> within each species each individual is essentially different or distinctive. This superiority is in a very real sense the human superiority . . . Indeed, if it were not so that one human being, honest, upright, respectable, God-fearing, can under the same circumstances do the very opposite of what another human being does who is also honest, upright, respectable, God-fearing, then the God-relationship would not essentially exist, would not exist in its deepest meaning. (230)

Each and every individual, regardless of her worldly 'dissimilarities', is worthy of love, which in any version of Christian doctrine must hold pride of place. Even if Kierkegaard's paradigm of the individual alone before God crowds out any

real role for the Church, whether state established, Catholic or Protestant – a view that broke out with a fury at the end of his life – he was not without a concept of neighbour-love. That was the subject of *Works of Love* (1847), a classic of modern religious literature and a centrepiece of the second authorship.

The passage explores the shadow cast over time by eternity. One may compare temporal life to a stage play in which each of us is an actor with a different role, with different lines to recite, different garments to wear. Being rich or poor, a man or a woman – those are all so many costumes we wear in life. Imagine what madness would ensue if at the end of a performance, when the actors remove their costumes, an actor were to persist in his role, to continue to believe that he is Napoleon or the Emperor of Japan, to command his colleagues about and expect them to obey. Imagine the madness were the man to confuse himself with his costume. Just so, Kierkegaard says, when death ends the human play, when the curtain of time comes down and the real life of eternity is unveiled, then we will see as we are seen, in naked truth, as we all are before God, essentially equal. Those who live their lives amidst wealth and power and worldly advantage should take care: do not lace the garments of dissimilarity too tightly. Do not take too seriously the all too human dissimilarities that are a function of our outer circumstances. These are transient and external matters of chance that do not touch upon our essential humanity (contrary to the 'Existentialists,' Kierkegaard's emphasis on 'existence' does not exclude some notion of a common or universal 'essence'). Death offers us the greatest and most succinct summary of life. Death is the great leveller, eternity the great equalizer. In the cemetery no one has the advantage, even if his plot is half a foot larger than his neighbour's.

The absolute and eternal equality of all individuals forms the basis of Kierkegaard's interpretation of the second greatest of all Christian teachings 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Mark 22:39), the first being, of course, to love God. The universally human feature of human existence is that each person exists in and has a unique relationship with God, that each and every person is loved by God, and in turn commands our love. That universality is precisely why love is the first of the commandments, why love must be *commanded*, lest love be subject to the vagaries and vicissitudes of the dissimilarities, according to which some are more lovable than others.

Kierkegaard makes a foundational distinction between 'preferential love' and 'commanded love'. The former sort, which includes erotic love (*eros*) and friendship (*philia*), is what we commonly call love, where love is evoked by the lovable features that the other bears (or does not). Such love springs from inclination, feelings and affections, and cannot be commanded. Erotic love and friendship are variable, differential and particularizing, operating on the plane of dissimilarities, of what differentiates the one from the other, and they remain enclosed within a more or less narrow circle of preferences. Preferential love, Kierkegaard says, is 'pagan', by which he does not mean to denounce it, but merely to say that it belongs to a state of nature rather than of grace, that it is not guided by evangelical charity. Its charms, along with its fragility, transiency, fickleness, anxiousness and jealousy, have been the stuff of the poets from time immemorial. But preferential love for him is ultimately a form of self-love, for in loving my spouse or children or friends I am in love with the wider circle of myself, my other extended self, even if I regard them as the better half of myself.

Commanded love, on the other hand, is profoundly egalitarian and non-preferential, and it is directed to the 'neighbour'. By this Kierkegaard does not mean what this word commonly means, those who are nearest and so dearest (as the word 'neigh', near, suggests in English). Rather, he means the 'next one' you meet (as the word *nächst* suggests in Danish), the next chap to come through the door, whoever that maybe, hence anyone, everyone. Neighbour emphatically includes the stranger and even the enemy. That love, which, as he says in an excellent metaphor, picks the lock of self-love, is called by still a third Greek word for love: *agape.* The Danish word he uses is *Kjerlioghed*, from the Latin *caritas* by way of the French *cher*, meaning the love of God, and the love that God commands we give the neighbour, a love that is disinterested and requires self-denial and self-sacrifice. By agapaic love he means genuinely wishing the true and eternal well-being of others, even if we intensely dislike them on the level of our affections, that is, in the temporal and preferential sense. One is commanded to love one's enemies and even to love oneself in an ordered way, but not in any narcissistic way. Commanded love should be unwavering and unchanging, non-preferential and non-exclusionary. It does not offer rich material for poets and novelists because its manner is quiet and inconspicuous. It is directed to everyone without regard to their worldly differences. One should not conclude that such love is merely 'justice' under another name – rendering to each what is their due – for love wishes the other well, which may very well be something more than their just deserts.

Kierkegaard offers a steady flow of insightful and powerful reflections in *Works of Love* that amply repay study, like the beautiful meditation on the theme that love believes all but love is not deceived (225). But there is also a disturbing

undertone that, as I have been compelled to point out, more and more surfaces in his work. In successfully distancing himself from the author of 'Diary of a Seducer' and establishing his identity as a religious author, a certain over-correction seems to have set in. A theory of 'two worlds' emerges. The tension between time (the sphere of preferential love) and eternity (upon which the sights of commanded love are fixed) begins to slide into a dualistic disequilibrium. Time can never hold its own against eternity. Indeed the very image of our earthly life as a 'garment' shed at death may be found in Plato's *Phaedo*, a foundational document in western theories, that treats our lives as torn asunder by the opposing pulls of time and eternity.

By sanctifying each individual before God, Kierkegaard says, Christianity has abolished the cruel pagan doctrine of natural slaves and exposed such worldly 'dissimilarities' for what they are – outer garments. But by the same token, Christianity is not a fool and it does not indulge the Romantic illusion that some state of 'pure humanity' (equality) ever existed where earthly differences are taken away; *nor is it even the business of Christianity to remove them.* Kierkegaard's analysis of the absolute equality of individuals might have led him in the direction of a radical and egalitarian political theology, of a radical Christian socialism. But in fact it took the form of Christianity as a private piety that suffers the injustices of the world around us as inevitable limitations of life in time. Christianity surveys with 'the calmness of eternity' all such dissimilarities, which will always be with us, and does not take sides with any. 'Christianity, then, does not want to take away the dissimilarity, neither of high rank nor of lowliness' (71). That 'does not preoccupy Christianity at all, not in the least', and to be preoccupied with that is 'worldliness'. While it is to

be preferred to meanness, it is not a properly Christian matter. Christianity is in the business of securing our heavenly home not of providing affordable housing here on earth, of producing 'Christian equality' not economic equality. It is a mark of 'temporality', of a 'well intentioned' person, to be concerned with establishing hospitals to treat the sick and dying, but eternity's purposes would be served if no such needs were ever addressed but one's inner intentions were merciful (326). Presumably then, when Jesus went about 'healing' the lame and lepers, when Jesus recommended that we clothe the naked and feed the hungry, that was his 'well intentioned' humanitarian side, not a mark of divinity. If Kierkegaard discovered the category of the 'single individual', he was never able to successfully cultivate the category of the concretely 'political', of a Christian politics that drew upon the Jewish prophets as upon Jesus's obvious 'preference' for the poor.

One also detects in *Works of Love* a growing moral rigorism about sexuality and marriage that upsets the equilibrium between the ethical and aesthetic set forth a few years earlier in Judge Wilhelm's defence of marriage and in the dialectic of the happily married knight of faith. Surely there is in erotic love, and certainly in marital love, something more than self-love and extended egoism, as Kierkegaard suggests, something more than a 'selfish pair', selfishness doubled. It is tempting to psychoanalyse Kierkegaard at this point, but the sexual complications of his personality are at bottom irrelevant; indeed, one might be led by one's psychological torments to see a truth withheld from others. It is no less tempting to suggest that an exorbitant egoism simmers in all this preoccupation with purifying oneself of egoism. As Levinas suggested, there is a long-term egoism in wanting to trade earthly for eternal happiness. But one cannot resist pointing out that

Kierkegaard's view of erotic love in *Works of Love* is myopic. Genuine erotic love is neither selfishness nor duty nor some combination of the two but something different that eludes the dualistic categories of this book. It is more self-surrendering than preferential love and more gift-like than commanded love. One detects, in retrospect, a simmering cynicism about human existence that surfaces in Kierkegaard's final years.

Bishop Mynster coolly declined to see Kierkegaard, who paid him a visit shortly after this book was published. Kierkegaard understood the brush-off as a concern about the book. Perhaps the bishop, a lifelong family friend, had hoped to see the influence of his own sermons on Kierkegaard's development of this central Christian theme. But the Bishop discerned something else, a criticism of the current state of Christian life in Denmark, over whose care, of course, the Bishop presided. I wonder if Mynster might also have sensed this cynicism about the world and the body, which is at odds with a religion whose central figure is Incarnation. In one of the journal entries of 1852, Kierkegaard said that suffering is the spark given off by one's heterogeneity with the world.[29] Genuine Christian suffering, unlike that of Job or Abraham, is to the end, unto death, and it is repaid only in eternity. So if one is not suffering it is because one has compromised with the world. To take so grim a view of our life in time would have rightly worried the bishop.

9

THE SELF

A human being is a spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self.

In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation and in the relation to the relation; thus under the qualification of the psychical the relation between the psychical and the physical is a relation. If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self.

The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another. This is why there can be two forms of despair in the strict sense. If a human self had itself established itself, then there could be only one form: not to will to be oneself, to will to do away with oneself, but there

> could not be the form: in despair to will to be onself. This second formulation is specially the expression for the complete dependence of the relation (of the self), the expression for the inability of the self to arrive at or to be in equilibrium and rest by itself, but only, in relation itself to itself, by relating itself to that which has established the entire relation. Yes, this second form of despair ultimately can be traced back to and be resolved in it. If the despairing person is aware of his despair, as he thinks he is, and does not speak meaninglessly of it as of something that is happening to him . . . and now with all his power seeks to break the despair by himself and by himself alone – he is still in despair and with all his presumed effort only works himself all the deeper into deeper despair. The misrelation of despair is not simply a misrelation but a misrelation in a relation that relates to itself and has been established by another, so that the misrelation in that relation which is for itself also reflects itself infinitely in the relation to the power that established it.
>
> The formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.
>
> (*Sickness Unto Death*, pp. 13–14)[30]

This extract, taken from the beginning of *Sickness unto Death*, is famous for an abstruseness which rivals anything to be found in Hegel. It would however be regrettable, Kierkegaard says in the preface to the book, if its high theoretical tone left the impression that the book is too rigorous and scholarly to be edifying. For authentic Christianity everything should be edifying and abstract learning is a jest. What this book is about is simple, and anybody can understand it – to become oneself by

standing alone before God and to assume responsibility for one's life, as opposed to windy philosophical speculation about the meaning of world history. The words are spoken by a new pseudonym, Anti-Climacus. Compared to the earlier pseudonyms, this is a very thin, transparent and un-poetic narrator, who lacks the irony or playfulness of the pseudonyms of the first period. The sole function is one of modesty. Anti-Climacus states the case for Christianity in such rigorous and high minded terms that Kierkegaard does not want to give the impression that he himself pretends to have got that far. A disclaimer to that effect published in Kierkegaard's own name would have served the same function. It is important not to be confused by the 'anti-' in the name. This pseudonym does not mean the author is 'against' (Johannes) Climacus. The 'anti-' means 'before', 'preceding' or 'taking precedence', as in 'antecedent' or 'anticipate', hence higher than Climacus, who as a humorist did not claim to have got as far as Christianity.

The book contains Kierkegaard's most sophisticated formulation of his 'dialectical' and existential conception of the self. The book is organized around a metaphor about the health of the soul and the corresponding 'sickness' that threatens it, which is called despair. A human being is a spirit, and a spirit is a self, where a self is neither a merely material nor a purely immaterial being, neither a brute animal nor an angel. A self is a 'synthesis' of two different realms – of time and eternity, body and soul, finite and infinite, outward and inward, the actual and the ideal, the possible and the impossible. But this does not mean, as it might suggest, a composite admixture of each, but rather a 'relation' or dialectical tension, which constitutes a third element, charged with straddling the distance and dealing with the dialectical tensions between these opposites.

The self is not a simple synthesis or relation but, in the complex vocabulary of the passage, is 'the relation's relating itself to itself'. In any relation there are three things – the two things related (say 5 and 10, to use a mathematical example) and the relation itself (half, double). A merely 'negative' relation is found among passive, impersonal objects, whether they are physical objects or ideal objects (logic, mathematics). The 'self', on the other hand, is a positive and personal relation. In the self, the relationship is actively taken up and assumed, enacted and performed; the third thing actively carries out and monitors the relationship between the two relata. Because the self must actively synthesize itself, the enactment of the synthesis may be done more or less successfully. When it is carried out well, we may say variously that the self is true to itself, or the self is itself, or simply it is a self (in good health). When it is carried out badly the self breaks down, failing to be itself, and the tensions out of which it is constituted fall into a disproportion. This happens when the finite is given too strong a head vis-à-vis the infinite, allowing the entire synthesis to fall into a certain dysfunction or misrelation. That dysfunction is the 'sickness', which Kierkegaard here calls 'despair', meaning not psychological depression but a deep disruption of equilibrium or inner dynamics of the spirit. Despair is a certain falling out from oneself, failing to be oneself.

Kierkegaard then introduces a further complication. The human self is not a self-sufficient or autonomous relation but a derived or dependent one, one that has been 'established by another', by which he means that it is created by God. Therefore, the care of the self, that is, maintaining the healthy equilibrium of this self-relationship, involves God. If human beings were autonomous and not dependent

upon God then despair would consist simply in failing to will to be oneself. For example, failing to 'know thyself', a pagan (Greek) injunction, is despair on a purely human level. But despair intensifies when the self fails to relate itself properly before God. Then one may will to be oneself but still does so *in despair*. The dependent self acts as if it is not dependent and asserts its independence vis-à-vis God. So if one attempts to break out of despair on one's own, the only result would be to dig a deeper hole of despair for oneself. The only way out of this deeper despair is to will to be oneself while surrendering this sense of self-sufficiency and resting in the 'power that established it', God. We have an example of this point in *Either/Or*. By not wanting to be a self at all the aesthete falls into the first form of despair (not willing to be oneself), but the 'Ultimatum' from the country priest warns the Judge about the second form – trying to be a self on one's own, without God.

There follows a remarkable inventory of the possible ways and means in which one might fall into such despair, one of such depth and subtlety as to be the envy of, and clearly a model for, the psychological and psychoanalytic theories of a later day. In an analysis that foreshadows Freud's reflections on 'denial' and the mechanisms of unconscious repression as well as Heidegger's notion of inauthenticity and Sartre's notion of bad faith, Anti-Climacus focuses his attention on a crucial element of despair, namely, the degree to which one is conscious of it. There is no one who is not in some hidden corner of his soul in despair. There is no one who does not experience an inner if hidden 'anxiety' (in German, *Angst*) about the freedom to be otherwise than one is. There is no better proof of freedom than the flight we take when in an unguarded moment we come face to face with our freedom.

(Kierkegaard had developed this analysis in full in an earlier work, *The Concept of Anxiety*, which was of central importance to Heidegger's *Being and Time* and to the later Existentialists. It was from that source that the German word *Angst* made its way into highbrow vocabulary.) Anxiety is not despair but the 'presupposition' of despair. Only a being who is free to choose to be a self can fall into despair, which is accordingly a mark of spirit. Animals have no experience of despair, Anti-Climacus conjectures, unsurprisingly, because the divide between animals and human beings will be just as wide as is the gap between time and eternity upon which Kierkegaard insists. Protesting that one is not consciously in despair proves nothing, unless it proves the opposite; for it is a form of despair to deny being in despair, or to fail to be conscious that one is in despair when one is. One makes progress on overcoming despair by owning up to it, which means that a feeling of tranquillity may be a danger sign – of a repressed despair – just as a bodily disease is most insidious when we experience no symptoms. At the other extreme lies 'defiance', when one knows one is in despair and refuses to be saved. Here one wills oneself, one's misery, in despair, by refusing help from another or from God (205).

The charms of a woman, for example, are a source of happiness, but happiness in time is not a qualification of the spirit: 'deep, deep within the most secret hiding place of happiness there dwells also anxiety, which is despair' (25). It is precisely when we are happy that we still feel deep within that something is wrong. What is it? 'Nothing', answers despair. Indeed it is just that – another unacknowledged citation in *Being and Time* – the ephemeral and transient nullity of earthly happiness. For the French Existentialists the transiency of temporal joys is a condition of their beauty; but for Kierkegaard it is

their undoing, because it seemed to him self-evident that real joy must be eternal and everlasting.[31] By the same token, for Kierkegaard, unhappiness and suffering are a gift, an 'infinite benefaction', in the way that a painful symptom by warning us of a disease allows us to treat it in time. Unhappiness awakens our consciousness as spirit, making us aware that the self exists before God, reminding us of the one thing necessary:

> And when the hourglass of time has run out, the hourglass of temporality . . . when everything around you is still, as it is in eternity, then – whether you were man or woman, rich or poor, dependent or independent . . . whether your name will be remembered as long as the world stands . . . eternity asks you and every individual in these millions and millions about only one thing: whether you have lived in despair or not . . . (27)

Eternity will want to know: have we looked within and assumed responsibility for our lives before God, or have we lived in despair, allowed ourselves to be distracted by life's diversions, ignoring, even repressing something deeper and more disturbing?

Let us take one example from a very subtle psychological inventory. The 'existing spirit', the self, is supposed to be the concrete synthesis or unity of finite and infinite and not to fall into a one-sided or 'abstract' condition. Finitude gives our lives limit and definition while the infinite keeps pushing us on, widening our horizons. One way to disturb this equilibrium is to overemphasize the side of 'infinity', which means to succumb to the fantastic, the unlimited. When that happens, the infinite runs unfettered by the realism of the finite, leading persons into the imaginary and away from their actual life. The self becomes volatilized, an abstraction. A professor speculating on the goals of world history while forgetting the demands that

press in upon him from the real world – from his students and his family – forgets the work 'that can be accomplished this very day, this very hour, this very moment' (32). In this way, one actually lacks a self and does not even realize the loss, the way one would notice if one lost 'an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife'. The alternate possibility is 'finitude's despair', which lacks the infinite. This means to lead a life confined within such narrow borders that one has no larger vision, no dreams, no sense of what lies beyond the horizon. The first kind of despair is swept away by dreaming of what is possible. The second form is locked inside a world of fatalism and necessity; one suffers from a loss of hope and dares not dream that things can be otherwise.

To maintain the dialectical equilibrium between these constituent factors in the synthesis requires us to maintain them before God, by trusting God, for the notion that we can remedy this despair by our own efforts is itself a form of despair. 'Defiance', which means wanting to do it all ourselves, acknowledging no power over ourselves, is active, manly – despair! It rebels against all existence and is sure it has found evidence against its goodness (73), which is quite an apt way to describe Camus's central point of view. Despair 'potentiated', raised up a notch to a higher power, as when a number is squared, is sin. For then despair takes a stand 'before God', which is the very definition of sin (121). Paradoxically, that implies that red-blooded sin is rare. The Greeks had a notion of ill fortune and of moral evil, but since they did not have an idea of standing personally before what the Christians call God, they had no idea of what Christianity calls sin; on the other hand, in Kierkegaard's view most Christians are such spiritless mollycoddlers, such Christian-pagans, that they are incapable of real sin. (100) The opposite of despair is

faith – resting transparently on the power that constitutes us. The despair attendant upon the 'state of sin' is a new sin, the sin of despairing over sin, in which the self closes itself up within itself and 'protects itself' against the 'good'. It covers its ears and will not hear the good news calling. Sin is a process of gradually self-intensifying despair: for sin leads to the sin of despairing over sin, which is the further sin of despair over the forgiveness of sin, which finally culminates in an aggressive attack upon Christianity, which teaches the forgiveness of sin. Such an attack (one thinks of Nietzsche) at least does justice to Christianity by taking it for what it is, the offence and scandal that before God each one of us is important and that God can forgive sin. If despair is the unhappy relation to the scandal, faith is the happy one, the one that affirms the infinite qualitative difference between sinners and the one who forgives sin (123–4).

One can hold this book up as a question to be put to Kierkegaard himself. One can press upon Kierkegaard's own writings the question raised in the subtle enquiries of the *Sickness unto Death*. Does Kierkegaard himself finally maintain the synthesis, or the healthy equilibrium, between time and eternity that is the central dialectical tension in his work? The tension between eternity and time was originally conceived as giving life its existential passion, but does it end by draining life of its energy and vitality? In the earlier writings he stressed that Christianity intensifies human existence because in each moment of decision our eternal happiness hangs in the balance. But now he seems to say that any joy we take in temporal life is a sign of a silent sickness unto death. If what we learn from the book is that the sickness is to be happy and the wellness is to suffer, then is not all earthly joy crushed and life no more than a vale of tears? Are we to conclude that earthly happiness is inversely proportionate

to eternal happiness and as such is a symptom of the sickness unto death? If time is finally overwhelmed by eternity, which proves too much for time, and if that is what Christianity finally means, then Christianity, too, is despair.

10

WORLD-WEARINESS

This Life's Destiny in Christian Eyes

Our destiny in this life is to be brought to the highest pitch of world-weariness.

He who when brought to this point can insist that it is God who has brought him there, out of love, has passed life's examination and is ripe for eternity.

It was through a crime that I came into the world, I came against God's will. The offence, which even though it makes me a criminal in God's eyes is in a sense not mine, is to give life. The punishment fits the crime: to be bereft of all lust for life, to be led to the extremity of world-weariness. Man would try his bungling hand at God's handiwork, if not create man, at least give life. 'You'll pay for this all right, for only by my grace is the destiny of this life world-weariness, only to you who are saved do I show this favour [*sic*] of leading you to the highest pitch of world-weariness.'

Most people these days are so spiritless, so deserted by grace, that the punishment simply isn't used on them. Lost in this life they cling to this life, out of nothing they become nothing, their life is a waste.

> Those who have a little more spirit, and are not overlooked by grace, are led to the point where life reaches the highest pitch of world-weariness. But they cannot come to terms with it, they rebel against God, etc.
>
> Only those who, when brought to this point of world-weariness, could continue to insist with the help of grace that it is out of love that God does this, so they do not hide any doubt that in their soul, God is love – only they are ripe for eternity.
>
> And God receives them in eternity. What does God want? He wants souls who could praise, adore, worship, and thank him – the business of angels . . . and what pleases him even more than the praises of angels is a human being who, on life's final lap, when God is transformed as if into sheer cruelty, and does everything with the most cruelly contrived callousness to deprive him of all lust for life, nevertheless continues to believe that God is love, and that it is from love that God does that. A man like that then becomes an angel.
>
> (*Papers and Journals*, 25 September, 1855, pp. 647–8)[32]

Less than two months after making this, the last entry in the *Journals,* Kierkegaard was dead, an old man yet only halfway through his forty-third year. Beyond austere, the view expressed in the extract is grim, even masochistic. Readers of Kierkegaard's last writings will have a hard time avoiding the conclusion that Kierkegaard had fallen into exactly the despair he warned against, a despair not of the infinite and eternal but of the finite and temporal. The journal entry praises 'world-weariness' and applauds a gospel of suffering which proclaims that the prospect of eternal happiness annuls earthly joys. *Livslede*, the Danish word translated here as 'world-weariness', also suggests sadness and disgust. Kierkegaard is proposing

that to be disgusted with the world makes one 'ripe for eternity'. In the *Postscript* 'essential' suffering meant an inner religious detachment sustained even while enjoying the fruits of the earth in a joyful and meaningful life. Now Kierkegaard's view is more cynical. Suffering means suffering in the most literal and outward sense, denying oneself earthly joys, up to and including marriage and children – which he claims make a charade out of Christian existence – and reaches its triumphant climax in martyrdom. One can hear the grim tones of Thomas à Kempis's *Imitatio Christi*, the classic of Christian asceticism that Kierkegaard admired. Gone is the equilibrium of the married knight of faith, gone indeed is any sense of the holy sacrament of Christian marriage, gone everything except weariness with life and the longing to be in the 'business of angels'. The God of these final years is fearful. We have been brought into the world in order to be torn out of time by way of the terrors of eternity.[33] God makes us ready to sing with the angels by torturing us out of the song of the earth. 'Spirit' now means not the capacity to maintain the dialectical tension between time and eternity but the courage to be ripped out of time and so ripened for eternity. Spirit means to see all this cruelty and callousness in a Christian spirit as a difficulty demanded by love.

These passages are interesting in view of the recurring comparisons of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche that have been made over the years. They remind us strongly of Nietzsche's analysis of the pathology of the religious soul, which means, according to Nietzsche, someone who thinks that life is refuted by suffering. For Kierkegaard, suffering is the sign of our heterogeneity with the world and our way of being weaned for eternity. Absent is any sense that suffering is simply an ingredient in the beauty and the rhythms of life that

Nietzsche stressed. Indeed, one wonders what has become of the world that Elohim declared 'good' five times and then added 'very good', for good measure, in the opening pages of Genesis. Champions of Kierkegaard, among whom I count myself, have a tendency to ignore these passages from 1854–5 and to emphasize instead the well-aimed lampooning of the clergy that is found in the later writings. But in the name of the very 'honesty' Kierkegaard stood for, we cannot ignore them.

We have come into the world 'through a crime' and 'against God's will' – this thought is itself so tormented one struggles to see what Kierkegaard means. He does not mean that he was an illegitimate child. He is referring to the story of the Fall in the second and more downbeat creation story, in which the Yahwist author makes the shame of nakedness and awakened sexual desire the result of disobedience (whereas in the first story, the priestly author has Elohim enjoin multiplication and declare all things good).[34] The propagation of the race by sexual desire, itself the result of sin, is a 'crime'.[35] Had there been no Fall, the propagation of the race would have been a great deal more businesslike, like bathing or brushing one's teeth, occurring in a state of angelic innocence free from the sway of sexual desire. To submit to sexual desire after the Fall is not only to embrace the effects of sin but also to perpetuate the unseemly flow of sin into the world. The birth canal is sin's channel, a 'cornucopia' of lost souls. Through sin more sinners are propelled into the world. Christianity, on the other hand, means to call a halt to sin, and if sin comes into the world through perpetuating human life, Christianity's purpose is to put an end to the human race and to stop the sexual propagation of the species. Christianity calls for celibacy, for the higher, narrower road, the stricter discipline that does not cooperate with sin; it only reluctantly permits

sexual desire as a fallback and a compromise with worldly lust. The compromise is contained in Paul's (in)famous remark that while he would have the Corinthians be celibate, like himself, he concedes that it is better to marry than to burn (I Cor 7:1, 7–8). Kierkegaard actually reprimands the Apostle for this concession and we are reminded that Paul is but the disciple while he, Kierkegaard, follows Jesus, who said that it is sinful even to desire a woman in one's heart.

What has become, then, of Christian marriage in Kierkegaard's view? The pastor should discourage the couple who come to him seeking to be married: 'Little children, I am the last person to whom you should turn . . . my duty is to use every means to hold you back' (247). But what does 'God's man' actually do? The human thing. He blesses the marriage and gets his ten dollars for his trouble; after all, the priests need large congregations to maintain their support. Unlike an honest man who might earn ten dollars 'by serving beer and brandy', the pastor earns a few dollars serving up a ruse that by giving into lust one does God's will. 'Bravissimo!' Kierkegaard comments cynically. This interest in marriage and children is Jewish business and not truly Christian, he adds. While in the soft and tender arms of a wife one forgets the woes of the world, one also forgets 'what Christianity is'. (164) Kierkegaard's final view of marriage – 'viewed Christianly' – was no less cynical than that of Johannes the Seducer – 'people are trivialized by marriage', which is 'something the lovers discover only afterward'. (241).

It is important to stress how much at odds with the Christian tradition Kierkegaard is on this point. Jesus did not consider their married state an impediment to choosing the apostles, and nothing Jesus afterwards said led any of the apostles to abandon their marriage. Furthermore, a married clergy was quite normal during the often persecuted pre-Constantinian

church which Kierkegaard otherwise admires. (Kierkegaard even tries to play down Jesus's attendance at the wedding feast at Cana.) Kierkegaard, who unwisely dismissed the significance of the newly emerging historical-critical study of the Scriptures, has taken Paul's statement on its face as an absolute and without regard to context. Paul, who thought the world would soon come to an end, perhaps even in a matter of months, likely thought that the best counsel he could offer the Corinthians at that moment was to keep to their present course and not launch any new projects. Even the Apostle John, who was not martyred, did not meet the standard of being a 'witness (*martyros*) to the truth' set by Kierkegaard, namely, literal persecution and martyrdom. All such objections would have been dismissed by Kierkegaard as compromise and cowardice, making a fool of God. That is what 'spirit-less' means in this passage: to lack the courage to be torn away from the world by the 'terrors of eternity' and to see this as the workings of God's 'grace' and 'love'.

Kierkegaard wanted to be a Christian Socrates, but the final vision expressed in 1854–5 suggests the darker wisdom of a Christian Silenus: best of all is not to be born, but if you are born, it is best not to perpetuate life. The shift to this viewpoint can be easily marked by the changed attitude to medieval monasticism, which he had earlier praised as an earnest but misguided religiousness because it translated inner detachment of spirit into an external and literal detachment from the world. Now he complains that monasticism is too lenient: it treats celibacy as a counsel of perfection, an extraordinary vocation appropriate only to a few called to make a special sacrifice to God, while treating life in the world as the ordinary vocation of a Christian (420–21). Kierkegaard no longer pleads his case as an 'exception' but now regards

celibacy as the norm for all to meet while making marriage and the family the exception, a compromise with and deviation from the norm. Luther (who left an Augustinian friary and took a wife) had headed in the wrong direction. Among many other things, Kierkegaard has lost sight of his own most fundamental notion, that each person stands before God in his or her own way.

Given his grim view of authentic Christianity, it will come as no surprise that Kierkegaard's final year on earth was stormy. But the storm had been gathering for several years in the *Journals*, which are filled with a growing resentment towards what he regarded as the ruse of 'Christendom' presided over by Bishop Mynster and the Danish clergy. One even finds there a good many misogynistic and misanthropic musings and a newfound taste for Arthur Schopenhauer, the German philosopher and rival to Hegel who was famous for developing a philosophical theory of 'pessimism'. Ordination, a pastorate, the secure life of the salaried clergy of the National Church, marriage and children – that was the road not taken, which he could not let alone. He was always explaining his own choice, his own 'or' – to Regine, to his readers and to himself. His final explanation is harsh: marriage and childbearing are criminal, a mockery of the Cross of Christ. If you marry, you will regret it eternally for it will compromise your eternal life; if you do not marry, you will regret it in your temporal life, for it will rob this life of its joy. The storm broke into the open after the bishop's death (30 January, 1854). Biding his time for most of the year for political reasons, waiting until the bishop's successor and an old rival, H. L. Martensen, was in place, Kierkegaard published his attack in December. Martensen had eulogized Mynster as a 'witness to the truth', choosing an expression

identified with Kierkegaard, who had written that Christianity is not a doctrine supported by evidence but a command to transform existence that can only be witnessed. Kierkegaard exploded. He attacked the late bishop, whose own support and approval Kierkegaard earnestly sought all his life, whose sermons he admired and whose views about the individual versus speculative thought he shared. He ranted that a witness – a martyr – does not live in long robes and comfort, like the bishop, but is persecuted and suffers for the truth. Interestingly, this critique of the aristocratic lifestyle of the clergy raised Kierkegaard's consciousness of what contemporary political theologians call Christianity's 'preferential option for the poor'. It finally elicited from him a more radical politics in tune with the political turn events had taken in 1848, a year that saw democratic revolutions break out all over Europe. Kierkegaard knew making a charge like this tends to position the critic as the true witness. One might have pointed out that Kierkegaard had not taken his own inheritance and given it to the poor, or that his newfound appreciation for evangelical poverty may not have been unrelated to his dwindling inheritance. He attempted to deflect that tendency by repeating his lifelong and heartfelt conviction that he was at best trying to become a Christian, that he could not claim to be one but only that he knew one when he saw one, a point that was also available to Mynster and Martensen. There is nonetheless broad evidence in the journals that Kierkegaard did think of himself as a martyr for the truth, persecuted by the public, the press and even by children on the street.

In a series of pamphlets that appeared over the next few months, Kierkegaard then launched what came to be known as the 'attack upon Christendom', organized around the claim

that Christianity does not exist and is nowhere to be found in 'Christendom'. He made a withering critique of the Danish clergy, a great deal of which was on target – along with Nietzsche he had flushed out the hypocrisy of 'bourgeois Christendom' – and a deal of good fun to boot. Here one finds a radical critique of social hypocrisy announced in the tones of a revolutionary. It is difficult to imagine what sort of 'church' could emerge from such a 'corrective', as he called it, if any at all. It would have been a radically deconstructed structure, a kind of church without church, to use a Derridean expression. But two things seem clear: it would have expended its wealth and possessions in the service of the powerless and dispossessed and, given its views on celibacy and sexual desire, it would likely have disappeared after the first generation.

One quality that remained of the earlier Kierkegaard was the laughter. As severe as his vision of Christianity was, he always kept the laughter on his side, although at times it is difficult to distinguish the laughter of a cynic from the laughter of a satirist. The liveliness of the polemics – he was polemical by nature, he said – revived his sagging spirits. The prose of 1855 reminds us of the sparkling wit of the early pseudonyms, which have always made for a much better read than the sometimes tedious intonations of the 'upbuilding' discourses. He had been publicly silent for three years and his polemic against the Danish clergy put the life back in his pen. Like Schopenhauer – for whose pessimism we find several expressions of admiration in the late journal entries – he thrived on his enemies. The one thing Kierkegaard could not deny gave him earthly joy, the one suffering that God had denied him, the one joy in mortal life he could not deny himself, try as often as he might, was writing: witty and satirical, brilliant

and groundbreaking, moving and eloquent portraits of the human comedy, in books that long outlasted any children he might have brought forth into this 'vale of tears'. At least that much was true about what he was saying about family life at the end of his years. Had he himself married, begotten children and become a pastor, he would likely have driven the whole lot of them – Regine, the children, the whole parish – quite mad. Indeed, there was something mad about Kierkegaard, a reflection in his own peculiar way of the foolishness of the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached. His singular and celibate life was the truth that was true for him, but even an elemental reflection on his own earlier writings would have reminded him that that does not make it true for everyone. If two people acting in good conscience cannot do different things in similar situations, he had said in *Works of Love*, then the God relationship is destroyed.

The pseudonyms had pilloried speculative metaphysics and the tenured professors who peddled it, and works like *The Present Age* had pummelled the press and the public. Now it was the turn of pastors to suffer the thrusts and sallies of Kierkegaard's pointed stylus. Suppose, he asks, it were God's will that human beings must not go to the Deer Park? From this the pastors would conclude that, never fear, one could indeed still go, and with God's blessing, just so long as the priests 'blessed the four-seated Holstein carriage and made the Sign of the Cross over the horse', for which they would of course be obliged to ask for a reasonable honorarium. The sole result would be that nothing would change except that now it would be more expensive to go to the Deer Park. Perhaps, he adds, the pastors might even go into the business of renting out horses and carriages, which coming from their own good selves would be especially pleasing to God, so that the divine prohibition would prove to be a veritable economic

boon for God's men (348). The clergy was not amused and after an initial response, Martensen withheld further comment, rightly judging it the best strategy not to draw further attention to such brilliant attacks whose frequent excesses were their own worst enemy.

A week after making this entry in the journals Kierkegaard collapsed on the streets of Copenhagen and he died with some composure six weeks later in Frederik's Hospital (November 11, 1855).[36] His elder brother Peter, now himself a bishop but refused admission to Søren's hospital bedside, conducted the church service, without mentioning his brother's scathing 'audit' of the state of public Christian life. At the graveside a nephew, Henrik Lund, broke the decorum of the scene by reading a statement protesting the official Christian burial, which by treating his uncle as a loyal son of the Church had trivialized everything that Kierkegaard stood for. Lund cited a text entitled 'We are all Christians', where Kierkegaard argued that the illusion that everyone is a Christian is so great that no matter how much a man protested against Christianity in his lifetime, he would still be buried a Christian. After all, everybody is a Christian, even the deceased, who rejected Christianity. The only thing that might effectively prevent a Christian burial, Kierkegaard had quipped, was if the late lamented had left behind no provisions to pay the pastor for his services (117–18).

NOTES

1 I use here the beautiful Dru translation in *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, trans. Alexander Dru, p. 73 (New York: Harper Torch Books, 1959).
2 Kierkegaard distinguishes between the edifying works of the right hand and the pseudonymous works of the left hand in *Kierkegaard's Writings*, XXII, *The Point of View: On My Work as an Author, The Point of View for my Work as an Author, and Armed Neutrality*, trans. and ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 36.
3 Kierkegaard wrote a dissertation for his theological degree that interpreted Socratic irony as 'infinite' and 'negative', which meant ironically exposing falsity but without laying claim to the truth. See *Kierkegaard's Writings*, II, *The Concept of Irony, with Constant Reference to Socrates*, together with *Notes of Schelling's Berlin Lectures*, trans. and ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).
4 Søren Kierkegaard: *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, trans. Alastair Hannay, pp. 32–3, 34, 35, 36–7 (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1996). The pages numbers in parentheses in the text of this chapter are to this work from which this opening extract is taken, a practice I will follow in every chapter unless otherwise noted.
5 *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, trans. and ed. Howard and Edna Hong, vol. 5, # 5857 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967–78).
6 *Kierkegaard's Writings*, XIX, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. and ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 124.
7 *Sickness Unto Death*, p. 27.
8 *Sickness unto Death*, p. 5.
9 I am using the older translation: Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. David and Lillian Swenson, rev. Howard A. Johnson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944, 1959), vol. 1, pp. 37–9.
10 *Either/Or*, vol. 2, pp. 140–43.
11 See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) for a famous statement of this objection.

12 *Kierkegaard's Writings*, VI, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, trans. and ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 34–7.
13 By having de Silentio describe a knight whose faith in God was not at odds with his marriage and his worldly duties, Kierkegaard admits to himself and to Regine that a true man of faith is so light of foot as to be able to marry and not miss a step, whereas he, Søren, pulled up lame. But the coded message to Regine is that he broke their engagement in the name of the right to be made an exception of by God. While his secrecy placed an obstacle to his marriage, it also held the key to his pursuit of his own personal mission, to find the truth that is true for him.
14 *Kierkegaard's Writings*, XII, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments'*, trans. and ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 199, 201, 203–04.
15 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 625–27.
16 See Roger Poole, *Kierkegaard's Indirect Communication* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), who presents the variety of interpretations while taking a controversial stand of his own.
17 Jean-Paul Sartre, 'The Singular Universal', in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Josiah Thompson (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1972), pp. 230–65. This is a distinguished collection of studies.
18 *Indirect Communication*, p. 12.
19 *Indirect Communication*, pp. 162–3.
20 Joel Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness: Kierkegaard's Poetics of Faith, Hope and Love* (New York and London: T & T Clark, 2005), pp. 5–8.
21 *Kierkegaard's Writings*, XXI, *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourselves*, trans. and ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 2, 91–2
22 *Kierkegaard's Writings*, XVI, *Works of Love*, trans. and ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 275.
23 *Kierkegaard's Writings*, XIV, *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age*, trans. and ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 90–95.
24 See George Pattison, '*Poor Paris!*' (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1999).
25 The leading proponent of this reading of Kierkegaard is Bruce Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). See also Mark Dooley, *The Politics of Exodus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).
26 *Works of Love*, pp. 86–9.

27 *Two Ages*, p. 96.
28 *Kierkegaard's Writings*, XVIII, *Without Authority*, trans. and ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 165.
29 *Papers and Journals*, trans. A. Hannay, pp. 545–8.
30 *Sickness unto Death*, pp. 13–14.
31 That is what 'postmodernists' criticize under the name of the 'metaphysics of presence': to assume that only what is enduringly present (*ousia*), what is permanent, is really real. That is why Heidegger said that Kierkegaard did not raise the 'question of Being', did not put this assumption into question, and why I have said that this distinction between a merely fleeting time and everlasting eternity is his most fundamental background assumption.
32 *Papers and Journals*, trans. A. Hannay, pp. 647–8.
33 *Kierkegaard's Writings*, XXIII, *The Moment and Late Writings*, trans. and ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 312. All page references in parentheses in this chapter are to this text.
34 The first creation narrative (Gen. 1–2:3), the story of the six days, is attributed to 'P', a priestly author; composed in the sixth century BCE, during the Babylonian captivity, it refers to God as 'Elohim' ('God'). The second narrative (2: 4–24), the story of Adam and Eve, is attributed to 'J', because it refers to 'Yahweh', with a 'J' in German ('Lord'); it was written some two centuries earlier, during the period of the kingdom of Solomon and David. The first narrative (the good news) is more optimistic, the second (the bad news) is a more downbeat story about the first sin.
35 *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Hong, Vol. 3, no. 3044, p. 337. See Nos 2578–631, pp. 123–49, for the entries on marriage. They grow progressively more severe: no. 2629 (1854), p. 147 'tolerated fornication'.
36 The most likely cause of death is 'Pott's Disease', tuberculosis of the spine. See Joseph Brown III M.D., 'The Health Matter Briefly Revisited', *Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter*, no. 49 (August, 2005): 16–20. Kierkegaard himself attributed his declining health to drinking cold seltzer water the previous summer.

CHRONOLOGY

1813 May 5. Søren Aabye Kierkegaard is born.
1830 Begins studies at University of Copenhagen.
1834 April 15. First journal entry.
1835 Summer vacation at Gilleleie.
1837 May. Meets Regine Olsen.
1838 August 9. His father, Michael Pederson Kierkegaard, dies.
1840 July. Passes comprehensive examinations.
September 8. Proposes to Regine Olsen.
November 17. Enrols in Pastoral Seminary.
1841 July 16. Defends M.A. dissertation, *The Concept of Irony.*
August 11. Breaks engagement with Regine.
October 25. Trip to Berlin, hears Schelling's lectures.
1842 March 6. Returns to Copenhagen.
1843 *Either/Or, Fear and Trembling, Repetition*
1844 *Philosophical Fragments, The Concept of Anxiety*
1845 *Stages on Life's Way*
1846 January–February. Attacked by the *Corsair.*
Concluding Unscientific Postscript
Two Ages
1847 *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*
Works of Love
November 3. Regine marries Frederik Schlegel, a career diplomat.
1848 *Christian Discourses*
The Crisis and A Crisis in the Life of an Actress
Composes *The Point of View of My Life as an Author* (published 1859).
1849 *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*
The Sickness unto Death
1850 *Practice in Christianity*
1851 *For Self-Examination*

1851–
1852 *Judge for Yourselves* (published 1876)
1852–
1854 Period of public silence, nothing published.
1854 January 30. Bishop Mynster dies.
April 15. H. L. Martensen named to succeed Mynster.
December 18. Kierkegaard launches attack on Martensen in *Faedrelandet* (*The Fatherland*), a popular newspaper.
1855 Attack is broadened into an attack on Danish clergy, continues through May.
May–September. Continues attack in the *Moment*.
September 25. Last issue of the *Moment*. Last journal entry.
October 2. Admitted to Frederiks Hospital.
November 11. Death

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Primary Sources

Published works: I myself first acquired a taste for Kierkegaard in the older translations by Walter Lowrie and David and Lillian Swenson, and many people still prefer them because they are more graceful and flowing and because they better preserve Kierkegaard's sparkling wit. I have occasionally used them here to give the reader an example of the good fortune the first generation of Anglophone readers had in their encounter with Kierkegaard. Most of these books can still be acquired in used paperback editions. The new translations, which are now the standard, are more technically correct and organized, but I find them more literal and awkward: *Kierkegaard's Writings*, trans. and ed. Howard and Edna Hong et al., 26 volumes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978–2000); they come equipped with a stunning scholarly apparatus and system of annotations. Alastair Hannay's translations (Penguin Books) are more critical than the older ones and more felicitous than the Hongs'.

Journals: I occasionally cite the beautiful translation made in 1939 by Alexander Dru for Oxford University Press and reprinted in *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper Torch books, 1959; reissued Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003). This is a splendid place to start reading Kierkegaard. Alastair Hannay, *Søren Kierkegaard: Papers and Journals: A Selection*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1996), a much larger selection, is an excellent translation that is the next best thing to read. The usefulness of the most comprehensive translation, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 7 vols (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967–78), is impaired by an unhappy decision to group the entries topically instead of chronologically.

Biographies

Walter Lowrie, *Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938) and *A Short Life of Kierkegaard* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1942) are old chestnuts, but a bit hagiographical. Josiah Thompson, *Kierkegaard* (New York: Knopf, 1973), is quite incisive and demythologizing but a bit cynical. Thompson is a predecessor of the truly comprehensive (866 pages) and highly demythologizing biography by Joakim Garff, *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). The account that I like most, that balances an insightful intellectual history with critical biographical detail, is Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Secondary Literature

Bruce Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) is an invaluable resource for the times in which Kierkegaard lived. David Cain, *An Evocation of Kierkegaard* (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1997), a 'coffee-table' book of photos with accompanying text, is a beautiful and touching tribute to the place where Kierkegaard lived.

The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard, eds Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) is a superb collection of studies by experts.

Robert Perkins has done a great and unflagging service of editing *International Kierkegaard Commentary* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984–), a series of commentaries that appear in conjunction with each of the Princeton University Press translations; every major Kierkegaard scholar has contributed to these books.

James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) is a reissue (with an updated annotated bibliography) of a 1953 book, revised in 1965, which remains to this day one of the best places to go for a first-rate introduction.

Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971) is another splendid introduction, but this time with a literary twist.

George Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses* (London: Routledge, 2002) is the best place to get an angle on literature I neglected in this book. Pattison is one of the very best Kierkegaard people writing in English and a significant thinker in his own right.

A very good treatment of the Heidegger/Kierkegaard relation is John

Edward van Buren, *The Young Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

Space does not permit me to go on, but if, in addition to these books and the books I cited in the notes, one keys in the following names for 'author' with Kierkegaard as the 'subject' on Amazon.com, one will come up with any number of first-rate studies still available in English: Jon Elrod, C. Stephen Evans, Henning Fenger, M. Jamie Ferreira, Bruce Kirmmse, Louis Mackey, Gregor Malantshuk, John Lippitt, Edward Mooney, Jolita Pons, Michael Strawser, Josiah Thompson, Niels Thulstrup, Sylvia Walsh and Merold Westphal. They take a variety of approaches and do not by any means agree with one another, but they have produced well-written and well-argued studies that repay study.

Postmodern Readings

Apart from more traditional studies, there is today broad interest in Kierkegaard as a predecessor figure for 'postmodern' thought. Two excellent collections will get you started in that direction: *The New Kierkegaard*, ed. Elsebet Jegstrup (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004) and *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, eds Martin Matustik and Merold Westphal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). In the 1980s, Mark C. Taylor edited 'Kierkegaard and Postmodernism', a book series for Florida State University Press. Sylvian Agacinski, *Aparté* (1988) and Louis Mackey, *Points of View* (1986), were the most important books in the series. Taylor, a leading postmodern theorist today, started out in Kierkegaard – *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000) (reissue).

Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) is a striking deconstructive approach taken by the later Derrida. It corrects the slant given to Kierkegaard by Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. Michael Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

Mark Dooley, *The Politics of Exodus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001) gives a Derridean reading of the political implications of Kierkegaard.

Roger Poole, *Indirect Communication* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993) is a good example of what an enthusiast of the early Derrida would make of Kierkegaard; see also his 'The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth Century Interpretations', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, eds. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

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