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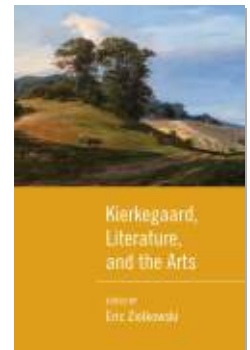
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Kierkegaard's Disruptions of Literature and Philosophy

Freedom, Anxiety, and Existential Contributions

Edward F. Mooney

I will address Kierkegaard's anomalous relations to literature and to philosophy. In addition, I consider Kierkegaard's relations, as a Socratic philosopher, both to his community and to specific individuals, the readers whom he meets one by one and challenges to effect an existential resolution, given the impersonal drift of their lives. It is not easy to disentangle these matters of literature, philosophy, and existential challenge. Each knits into the others. As a *literary figure* and as a *philosopher*, Kierkegaard disrupts the *conventions* of literature and philosophy, and as a person he enacts a kind of disordered, anomalous, hybrid status for himself. He becomes, simultaneously, a literary philosopher (or philosophical *littérateur*) and a cultural and existential *provocateur*.

Kierkegaard is precariously poised in Copenhagen in the way that Socrates is precariously poised in Athens: obeying the law, yet, through interrogations, challenging the law; a good citizen, yet not a good citizen. Socrates models a kind of existential heroism. He resolves the issue of *who he will be* in Athens, an issue with no conventional answer. This prods his admirers to resolve *who they* shall be. The full title of Kierkegaard's *Postscript* crescendos toward an enigmatic finale: the tome, we read, makes "an Existential Contribution." The contribution is to awaken me to the urgency of resolving *who I will be*.

Socrates disrupts Athens. Kierkegaard disrupts Copenhagen, its staid patterns of literature, philosophy, and personal life. Through face-to-face encounters, Plato's Socrates, especially in the early dialogues, makes *existential*, *philosophical* interventions. He stings his listeners, stops to interrogate them, and as often as not, abandons them—seduced but confused and without answers. Kierkegaard's pseudonymous texts are crafted to replicate the sting of Socratic face-to-face encounters. *Postscript* or the earlier *Philosophical Crumbs*,¹ comes close to being *overtly* Socratic, yet the apparently more *literary* works (*Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Repetition*, for instance) are also Socratic. I begin with Kierkegaard as a disruptive *littérateur*.

A Kind of Philosophical Poet?

Kierkegaard is not a novelist, though “The Seducer’s Diary,” from the first volume of *Either/Or*, reads like a novella. He is not a dramatist, though *Stages on Life’s Way* restages Plato’s drama, the *Symposium*. Kierkegaard’s not an essayist, a “man of letters,” a journalist, nor a historian or biographer with a remarkable literary flair. His reputation does not rest on producing aphorisms or inventing pseudonyms under which he writes.² There is a tradition that claims Kierkegaard as a kind of poet, though we would be hard-pressed to find a poem in his work.³ That seems to exhaust the usual ways of being a literary figure.

If a field biologist is lucky enough to encounter strange plants or insects that are neither this nor that, that do not fit existing taxonomies, she might get to name her finds as a new species. We do not like to leave quirky things off the map, without a name, especially if they are terribly interesting. The brilliance of Kierkegaard’s sentences and paragraphs and the endlessly innovative and ever-increasing bulk of his publications make his specimens terribly interesting. His works, like lively biological specimens, are even self-replicating. One strange invention spawns successors with family resemblances to earlier family specimens, and the extended family spawns successors. Kierkegaard’s genes reappear in Ibsen and Kafka, for instance. Literature has an evolutionary history.⁴ Kierkegaard becomes an Ur-text for Ibsen, Rilke, Auden, Dinesen, Kafka, and (perhaps in a different league) Ingmar Bergman, John Updike, and Woody Allen. And it is clear that Kierkegaard inherits genetic material from his ancestors, Dante, Plato, Aristophanes, Cervantes, and Goethe (to name a few).⁵

Kierkegaard did not deliver novels or plays or poems, but he easily *could have*. He had other fish to fry. Something diverts his attention from becoming *only* a literary figure, and a clue lies in the fact that he has sprouts, or siblings, in the gardens of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, Ortega and Sartre. A philosophical vocation competes in his breast with a literary one, making him both (and neither). To complicate matters, he has a religious vocation, too. The result is an anomalous mix, evident existentially in the writer’s three-part identity and in the trifold identity of his works: religious, aesthetic, and philosophical—all of the above and hence not *simply* any of the above.

Kierkegaard is his anomalous, hyphenated, elusive yet irresistible progeny. We face the riddle of the *Mona Lisa* or the Socrates who primarily tells us he knows nothing, leaving us smitten but empty-handed. It is hard to do philosophy, and harder to do *Socratic* philosophy. The Socratic task requires that you forgo the “objective” rigors of adding new paragraphs to the history of the subject, even paragraphs that are a critique of the subject. It requires that you “become subjective,” that you place the quite particular human being that you are smack in the middle of the picture. If you are Socrates, you are not an objective QED machine, and you question other “subjectivities” in

your path. You battle, sting, and nurse these into birth. Socrates is a midwife, not an expositor of old, or inventor of new, philosophical results. He sees us naked, in labor, and steps in to help, however painful the process. Kierkegaard sees us naked, too, and would push and pull us toward birth.

Having a Kierkegaard book arrive at our door is like having Socrates arrive there. If in beard and sandals he knocked and announced that he was a midwife come to assist, and you had expected an Amazon.com delivery, his arrival would be anomalous, out of bounds. Kierkegaard knows he cannot announce himself directly as our local midwife. He sticks to delivering strange books, half-philosophy, half-literature (and the religious ones sing from the side).⁶ We do not need an encyclopedia salesman hawking books of knowledge and wisdom, nor do we need a literary dilettante hawking film scripts or novels. We need his anomalous, pseudonymous books because, like Socrates, they administer to our souls, and our souls yearn.

Of course, the whole thing can backfire. We want to know what brand of writing confronts us, and if the answer evades us, we will be anxious, perhaps unbearably anxious, and we may just shut down. We are creatures who like to know what's going on. Responding to the knock at the door, if a Socratic voice spoke up—"I'm here as a midwife. . . . You didn't notice you were in difficult labor?"—we would slam the door. Or perhaps humor him a bit, hoping he'd move on. And if that failed, call psychiatric services.

Can Philosophy Abide Poetry?

After completing an apprenticeship in the university, earning the equivalent of a modern Ph.D., Kierkegaard never put his training to work in a recognized profession or career. He did not become a parson, professor, or lawyer, an editor, journalist, or dramatist. If he became a writer, it was perhaps in the style of a "freelancer" (it is the self-ascription Johannes de Silentio adopts in *Fear and Trembling*). But what, exactly, is that, other than a refusal to be tied down as a dramatist, novelist, poet, or critic? He might have become a professor and the author of philosophical tracts.

Now you might counter that Kierkegaard *has* a genre: he is a poet, at least "a kind of poet" (of course, not a straightforward poet, someone who writes poetry). Calling him one lets him be figurative, evocative, allusive, elusive, and enigmatic in a way denied to a standard essayist or philosopher. Yet being "a kind of poet," however alluring, can also be off-putting, much in the way Kierkegaard's texts can be.⁷ We might envy the freedom that comes with release from the demands of strict philosophical categories and a consequent permission to explore the unknown in a carefree way, with imagination and passions given plenty of line. On the other hand we might *resent* a careless way with cultural requirements of discipline and order. Plato warned against this hybrid, banishing poets from the state ordered by philosophy (or

so it *seems*: he did not rule out of order his *own* poetry). Logical positivists wanted to exile nonsense, and that nonsense included all that we call “poetry. For them, a poetic philosopher was an oxymoron: Nietzsche’s aspiration to be a “Music Playing Socrates” was madness.⁸

On the other hand, Jamie Ferreira finds two writers who *prefer* a volatile mix, and she cites them to introduce Kierkegaard—Robert Frost: “a poetic philosopher or . . . a philosophical poet, my favorite kind of both,”⁹ and then Wittgenstein: “philosophy ought only to be written as a poetic composition.”¹⁰ If poetry loosens straitlaced philosophy, philosophy can focus poetry beyond the everyday, transient, and local. Why not *enjoy* disruption of expectations, *enjoy* hybridity, its ambiguity and amorphousness? Border crossing and border erasing are attractive for they are daring, even if we dread the attendant insecurity.

Should We Suffer Misfits?

A book titled *Prefaces* that contains nothing but prefaces is not poetry or short story or political polemic. Odd creatures, like *Prefaces*, *Either/Or*, and *Postscript*, are full of brilliant writing bent on breaking up literary cubbyholes. They are Socratic irritants that can teach us Socratic ignorance, bafflement viscerally conveyed in a mix of annoyance, helplessness, and allure. Socrates’s interlocutors are left puzzling over missing definitions. Kierkegaard’s readers are left puzzling over texts missing their identifying labels and purposes. The job of sorting new arrivals for the library shelves was to have been simple and straightforward. But how did I come to expect that all proper books have proper places, simple niches, on my shelves? Perhaps I expect too much order from the world, or the wrong *kind* of order.

Books that are evasive about their genre can be evasive about their authorship. Neither *Prefaces* nor *Either/Or* has a straightforward author. They are pseudonymous: we both do and do not know who authors them. Is *Middlemarch* to be filed under George Eliot or Mary Anne Evans? Evans used a pseudonym so her work would be taken seriously. Kierkegaard used pseudonyms for less evident reasons. One might see them alternately as fluffy devices to provoke public interest, as suspect means to deflect personal responsibility for opinions or positions, or as tools to incite Socratic self-awareness and interpretative alertness. And apart from the motivations for using pseudonyms, there remains the issue of *power*. Can “Kierkegaard” overrule the claims to authorship made by Climacus, Johannes de Silentio, or Nicolaus Notabene?¹¹

If you wanted to shelve by genre, would the books end up under literature, philosophy, essays, or personal meditations? Perhaps (heaven forbid!) Kierkegaard is just “playing around” as an afternoon’s amusement. He says that his *Prefaces* are “like tuning a guitar, like talking with a child, like spitting

out of the window" (SKS 4:469 / P 5). But I suspect he is pulling our leg. After all, we might equally think that the *Postscript* or *Fear and Trembling* was not entirely serious, was like "tuning a guitar." In fact, an early section of *Fear and Trembling* is called—exactly—"attunement."¹² His feints, his intimating that it is all a joke, provoke our anxious parries. He calls *Prefaces* the work of "a light-minded ne'er-do-well [*en letsindig Døgenicht*]" (SKS 4:470 / P 6). But that's just flippant, a wisecrack.

Fear and Trembling is perhaps Kierkegaard's best-known book. We think of Abraham bringing his son to Mount Moriah. Kierkegaard must be defending Abraham's shocking and even servile compliance, we suppose. But why assume this book is out to make a case for Abraham (or against him)? Does it *look* like a book with a thesis to defend? The first part looks like a set of fables or mood swings and nightmarish dreams, and the second, like logical machinations of a deluded scholastic.¹³ Well, if it is not *that* disjointed, perhaps it is another hybrid, defined apophatically by what it is *not*: neither essay nor fable, nor sermon nor poem, nor polemic—but just possibly a dash of each of these in a strange stew.

Kierkegaard calls the book a "dialectical lyric," which is a stab at two of its stylistic features. But it is also pure unprecedented invention, a collage of fable, biblical exegesis, social commentary, dialectical investigation of concepts like "the ethical," "the tragic," and barely concealed farce. It is burlesque, or what Bakhtin calls "the carnivalesque."¹⁴

Kierkegaard is a *literary* genius, not just an astute philosopher, a withering social critic, and a profound diagnostician of the soul. He endlessly invents countergenres, paraboos, unclassifiable publications that question our sense of what forms a piece of writing can take. He gives us the vertiginous sense that there may be *no end* to such inventiveness—that under his spell, we live and read in infinite possibility.

What Is a Postscript?

Like *Prefaces*, the title *Postscript* names a *section* of a book's interior and can only anomalously fit as a title. Why do we divide interiors into prefaces, acknowledgments, chapters, postscripts, indexes, and so forth? If Kierkegaard gives us *Prefaces* or *Postscript*, will the next book be *Footnotes*? Or *Epigraphs*, or *Dedications*? Note that this tome, numbering nearly six hundred pages in its standard English edition, dwarfs the slim volume to which it is an appendage.

The slim parent-book is *Philosophical Crumbs, or a Crumb of Philosophy*. What is it to publish philosophical *crumbs*,¹⁵ trifles, or crumbling remains, especially in an age of philosophical structures and systems? The full title utterly dwarfs the shorthand *Postscript: Concluding Unscientific Postscript to "Philosophical Crumbs": A Mimic-Pathetic-Dialectic Compilation—an*

Existential Contribution.¹⁶ Open it, and you'll discover what looks like a scholarly tome, full of sections and subsections, appearing systematic and self-important, hardly "mere crumbs" or "fragments." In his masterful biography, Alastair Hannay suggests "Concluding Unscholarly Addendum."¹⁷

However we render the title, Kierkegaard is bending literary expectations to a breaking point. Is this title (not to mention what follows) some sort of insider's joke?¹⁸ Kierkegaard ensures—or hopes to ensure—that *if* we go on reading, we cannot be blasé, as if canvassing this sort of thing were routine, an everyday encounter. Unfortunately for many readers, I suspect, the shock of the title has ceased to make trouble. We dash on, ever eager to get to the business at hand: What positions are advanced or attacked, and with what arguments? Unfortunately, *Postscript* is not just about QEDs. The heart of its mission is forecast in the rest of the title. What is a "mimic-pathetic-dialectic compilation—an existential contribution"? (This does not sound like a promise of arguments.) A "postscript to crumbs of philosophy" seems troubling enough, and a "mimic-pathetic-dialectic compilation" only ups the ante. To mime or mimic is to engage in the comic, while to evoke pathos engages the tragic, and "dialectic" brings philosophy on stage. What sort of book, or genre, lets tragedy, comedy, and philosophy play equal and simultaneous parts?

Why Get off the Map?

Thoreau and Nietzsche were unreservedly literary writers *and* philosophers. Kierkegaard is not alone in being *both* philosopher *and* literary figure, working out a collaborative, hyphenated cultural and personal identity—off the map of standard vocational cubbyholes. There is a tradition, as it were, of defying traditions. Kierkegaard's Socratic, existential motivations *drive* him to defy classification. He artfully dodges our trapping moves. He has no wish that a *new* genre be inaugurated in his honor, and no wish to found a new philosophical style. To focus on classification—natural enough for orderly persons—distracts from our deeper needs and yearnings. Knowing where Kierkegaard belongs on philosophical or literary maps does not answer our existential anxieties about who we are and where we are going. The subtitle declares that the author makes an *existential* contribution. Mapping his oeuvre onto larger conventional cultural frameworks is a nonexistential *objective* project.

The *Postscript's* author contributes, if he does, by leading me away from classifications to the quality of my singular life, here and now, a life ready to be shaped, as I alone can shape it. Failing to settle objective matters of genre spins me out of objectivity toward emptiness. The books *refuse to tell me* which way to turn. I'm thrown into existential space wherein I anxiously realize that any resolution, any step forward is a step taken *on my own*. As

if to highlight this abandonment to my own devices, and the withdrawal of helping hands, in its final pages, *Postscript* invites me to leave it, relinquish it, as if its six hundred pages, like *Prefaces*, were the work of “a light-hearted do-nothing.”¹⁹ Like Socrates, the book stings and sings and departs.

Kierkegaard is attractive-unattractive, ordered-disordered, sober-comedic, and discomposes with a passion. He is an enfant terrible, a misfit who took pleasure in not fitting in and was just as nonconformist when it came to the shape of his literary production. He does not trade in the coin of the land.²⁰ If he eludes standard literary cubicles, he does no better when it comes to standard ways of writing philosophy. He can hold forth on the philosophical themes of subjectivity and objectivity, the individual and the crowd, the anguish of faith and the false assurance of careerism and church. But the faux genres he adopts are amusingly bizarre. Kant gives us titles without banners and whistles: *The Critique of Pure Reason* and *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. In full-dress regalia, Kierkegaard gives us *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to “Philosophical Crumbs”*: *A Mimic-Pathetic-Dialectic Compilation—an Existential Contribution*, authored by Johannes Climacus, with S. Kierkegaard responsible for publication. He won't settle into a literary, philosophical, or theological scene, or into essays or poetry, novellas, treatises, or history. *These refusals have an existential rationale. They serve freedom and new life.* He creates *anxiety*, that forerunner of change of self or recovery of soul.

To follow routine expectations is to idle one's freedom. We know from *The Concept of Anxiety* that freedom requires passage through “*a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy*” (SKS 4:348 / CA 42, emphasis in text). The amorphous nonshapes of his literary products induce and replicate the anxiety that is part and parcel of freedom. As Gordon Marino slyly dubs him, Kierkegaard is a “doctor of dread.”²¹ We undergo mild, or screaming, vertigo, and controlled, or terrifying, prescribed doses of “*sympathetic antipathy and antipathetic sympathy*.” Of course the doctor has our deep yearnings, our true interests at heart. This is all a forerunner and companion to my freedom.

What Is an Existential Contribution?

Postscript has a final tag in its amusing-disquieting subtitle. This “mimic-pathetic-dialectic compilation,” we are told, is “an existential contribution.” This is the first time in European philosophy, to my knowledge, that the adjective “existential” is used to signify a concern for one's personal existence.

Kierkegaard wants his literary philosophy to address readers intimately, existentially, to call out from them their sense of the meanings and directions of their life. Persons have complex social identities, but that is not the end of the matter. One may be identified as a judge or an aesthete, a shopkeeper or

a priest, an uncle, a hero, or a rogue. Kierkegaard's literary genius in its *first* phase is to give compelling portraits of social ways of being, as a public might construe and misconstrue them.

There are different ways to describe the role of a parson or professor. Kierkegaard critiques commonplace ways of taking these social identities, but he typically moves from social critique to soul diagnostics. Even as he provides provocative sketches of how a parson might appear on Sunday (for just one example), he moves simultaneously into more private landscapes of identity. In the *second* phase (or level) the question "How does *one*, *in general*, exist as a proper parson, or *typically* lose one's soul as a parson?" becomes quite another question. I now ask, "Have *I*, as a parson, lost my soul?" In this second phase of questioning, a general query about social identity gets transformed. I modulate the question, hearing it *existentially*, hearing it as addressing *me* and requiring *my* answer or response (and general questions drop away).

How do we know if Climacus has fulfilled his promise to provide an "existential contribution"? Well, I have to ask whether the register of my questioning has shifted. I have to ask whether I have modulated from the excellent but nonintimate, objective question "What is it to *exist* as a soul in love?" to another question, perhaps light years away. Do I find myself wandering toward or right in the middle of the question "Am *I* in love?" If that modulation takes place, Johannes Climacus has pushed or pulled me to consider an identity *I might assume* that is deeper than an array of possible social identities, generally considered. *That* is his "existential contribution."

A judge may play out his courtroom role, making brilliant legal points (or being only banal and routine), performing (or not performing) his social role. We might ask, if he falters, if he has his heart in his work, has sold his soul to the devil, or finds anything august in the office he holds. But these are not yet existential questions. They are still evaluations of social identity. To perform a *role* adequately can require that one put one's heart into it. A Socratic existential contribution does not ask us to assess whether someone fulfills a social identity, even fulfills the requirement that one does what one does with passion. Instead, the Socratic contribution elicits *from a particular someone, from this very judge in question, a self-evaluation*. An existential intervention succeeds when *this very judge* is startled or unnerved or disquieted by the existential address of another, and is then moved decisively to resolve or close down a just-opened field of possibilities. *This very judge* decides to reform, or resign, or prefer to do nothing, and then cashes out the decision in action.

I can now bring out subphases within this phase of considering my existence. I no longer focus on what someone in my circumstance does to achieve an identity, say, as a judge. I focus on what I alone must do to achieve this identity, and that cannot be a matter of rote imitation of what is generally done in that role. I move to the brink of existential commitment, my own forging of what that role uniquely will be *for me*, and then move through

the resolutions and actions that secure (however precariously) that unique existential identity, *my* reality. I move to the brink of the pond, dive into the pond, and come up swimming (or not). At the brink I no longer attend to existential reality *in general*. Diving in means leaping from a pond's-edge *view* of what an existential reality requires (say, that I must choose myself, dive in or not, as every human must)—to full immersion in *another* question. Who will I, *in particular*, be? And in the midst of immersion, I must settle the matter. Will I rise to the surface (or stay under longer, or forever)? Subsurface, how will I move, with what speed, and to what end? Will I rise to the occasion to do what I must do to be the minister or parson I must be? How, and with what style, and to what end?

Kierkegaard makes an existential contribution that only *I* can complete. *His* contribution is to offer me an existential space distinct from social space. If I accept this offer, I accept the open space where existential possibilities are vividly acknowledged, and then I *close* that radical openness through decisive resolution and action. Kierkegaard cannot complete the process he initiates. He can offer possibilities, but he cannot determine which of these will become mine. A contribution to charity is *realized* only when it is accepted, and Kierkegaard's existential contribution is *realized* only when I resolve first-personally to accept it by taking *this* step rather than *that*, thus resolving my anomalous situation *this* way rather than *that*. Accepting an existential contribution allows me to become who I *am* by allowing me to become who I *will be*.²²

It is hard to grasp the uncanny *magnitude* of the *Postscript's* intention. The comic, dialectic, and tragic are in the service of an infinite demand. It is a demand that can be fulfilled or rejected in any number of ways, and there are no guidelines included. So I can refuse the Climacus offer. I might be entertained by his comic wit, impressed by his dialectical finesse, or moved by the pathos of his descriptions. But his contribution is realized only if I am transformed, turned around. It is realized only if I am undone and then do myself up again (or find myself graciously restored—and not reject *that*).

You might reasonably think that it is enough for a literary figure to make a significant contribution to the canon or to stretch the canon or to win acclaim in her age. You might think it enough for a philosopher to better understand a classical philosophical puzzle or text or to win acclaim as a critic of the arts or politics, of gender relations or religious intolerance, or become a critic of insensitivity to the natural world. But none of this, laudable as it is, would be enough for Socrates, or for Kierkegaard.

Socrates engaged in enigmatic, unfinished conversations. Kierkegaard writes enigmatic, unfinished books. The aim is not to advance philosophy or literature as a discipline but to *alter listeners and readers* existentially, one by one. Both Socrates and Kierkegaard want to make headway toward the salvation of souls, or at least to remove vanities that obstruct that venture. Kierkegaard is the Socrates who "makes [those in his presence] ill

at ease, and inflicts upon them the unpardonable offense of making them doubt themselves.”²³ Kierkegaard writes late in life that his mission has always been Socratic.²⁴ His pseudonymous authorship especially is an endlessly unsettling Socratic installation of self-doubt offered as a preliminary to self-transformation.

Do We Need Cultural Credentials?

Kierkegaard is nonconforming. He will resist falling into conventional slots, and even a set of slots custom-made for him. Let me consider this indeterminacy of identity by reflecting on Henri Bergson in the last days of his life.²⁵ His life is not exactly a text, but he has an identity at stake; he lives out the inadequacy of social identity and the necessity of existential identity. The question he faces in his last days is not unlike the question facing Socrates in his last days in Athens, under trial and under arrest.

When Jews in Paris were required to wear yellow armbands after the Nazi takeover, Bergson was not exactly *required* to identify himself as such, ethically or religiously or existentially. He was close to converting to Roman Catholicism, as his friends had known, years before the Nazi invasion. His world renown as a philosopher would have earned him the exemption from persecution offered to Freud or negotiated by Wittgenstein for his sisters. (The Nazis were not entirely deaf to the onus of appearing to be cultural barbarians.) Yet Bergson, now a frail man in his eighties, chose to line up outside in a cold drizzle, wearing the armband marking his identification with the Jews already facing a horror that would only grow. He determined his identity, an existential identity, at that moment, when his social identity was indeterminate.

As outsiders we could wonder whether Bergson fit into social reality as a Jew, as a world-famous intellectual, as a soon-to-be-Catholic convert, or as a frail old man. Of course he was all of these. But social identity merely poses the question of his existential identity. Bergson’s final days bring into prominence the need for an *existential* determination: Will he resolve to have it end this way or that, in keeping with *these* of his espoused values and commitments, or *those*? Will he skirt the tempting but ultimately self-betraying alternatives?

Kierkegaard’s corpus stands to us roughly as Bergson’s life does. We recognize that the corpus or the life could be focused this way or that. The big difference is that we can revel in the choice Bergson made. He lined up in a cold drizzle. But the large Kierkegaard community has not yet resolved the field of possibilities that interpreters of Kierkegaard’s must work. It is relatively easy to make the case that Bergson is a hero. Is it as easy to make the case that Kierkegaard is Socratic and passes the existential task of response to *me*? My reading of his corpus can have *this* sort of life, *this* sort of identity,

rather than that. The focus is up to me (and to *you*). If I am right, Kierkegaard intends to put the ball in my court, if I exercise only my scholarly resources in order to find his cultural niche that will silence his voice—his *Socratic* voice.

We might say, "Look, Bergson had a moment of existential anguish, and thank God he came out of it a hero. *That's* what matters, not the array of possibilities that we see preceding his decision to walk into the rain and line up." Likewise, we might say, scanning the possibilities for shelving Kierkegaard's texts, "Look, here I am in a moment of anguish, and thank God I now come out of it taking the author as a serious, Socratic philosopher (not as a perpetual adolescent misusing great talent)." Thus I cease searching in the grid of objective possibilities for his literary-philosophic niche. Kierkegaard enacts Socratic parries and feints, delivering texts that escape our nets. Slipping our nets is more than an exhibition of skill, as if his contribution were to excel at child's play, hide-and-seek, or magical tomfoolery.²⁶ Having an objective cultural slot for him would defeat his aim. By repeatedly slipping our nets, he hopes to make a *Socratic, existential contribution*.

How Does a Socratic Sting Change Me?

If I am the recipient of an existential contribution, I should gather more than the information that *people like me* can be stung. I am humbled. I realize that *what* I make of the text is up to *me*. I can throw it aside, be slapdash, or struggle with it. If I decide to struggle, there are options. One possibility is a strategy of suspicion or resentment. Another is to follow what Kierkegaard calls "love, that lenient interpreter." That is, I can adopt a strategy of charity.²⁷ Which way I resolve this crux shapes the interpreter I will be. If I interpret generously, I am being generous and will be grateful for insights bequeathed. If I interpret suspiciously, as a master unmasker, I will feel myself proud, above being fooled, and grateful for little. If I interpret resentfully, I will take offense that someone has attempted to pull the wool over my eyes. I will not be grateful that texts or words or images have come my way. A grateful person is different from an indifferent or self-righteous or haughty and condescending one.

A reader willing to praise the beauty and worth of a range of appearances or partial realities is different from one who filters all appearances through an ideological lens that reduces them, deflating them to a status where they are helpless pawns in a play of power or money, or pawns in a war of genders or ethnicities or classes or religions or sexual orientations. A debunker enjoys domination over appearances, texts, or partial realities at hand. I might learn from such a lordly hermeneuticist that museums are extensions of colonial aggression (nothing more), that concert halls are monuments to wealth extracted from the poor (nothing more), that writing is a sublimation of sexual desire (nothing more), that Kierkegaard's oeuvre is a vain attempt to

assuage guilt (nothing more), that because his stature was unimpressive, his writing is working out a Napoleon complex (nothing more), that his father's confession of guilt made him an emotional cripple. Things are dispraised for what they mask rather than praised for any gift they might bring and for any occasion they might provide for thanksgiving.

I am a different person depending on the interpretative approach I accept and follow. How much of the world of texts is a world I can love? Is it within my purview to love many or few? How large is the world I must despise or wish dead? What powers my writing? Is it wonder or competitive adrenalin, tender, sympathetic appreciation, or disgust and resentment? I can (to some extent) tilt different interpretative postures this way or that, thus constituting an interpretative personality. Do I face texts or art or historical periods and events with indifferent royal aplomb? How much do I value my own halting or imperious voice?

I become *this* sort of interpreting person or *that* as I take my cues for interpretation this way or that. In the broadest sense, reading is an ethical venture, an activity that reveals something of what I take to be good and take to be part of the good life and take to be beyond the pale, and my quickness to find fault with texts can be a stain on my reading character just as my quickness to find fault with persons can be. We are our labor, and if our labor is writing and reading, we expose who we are—I expose who *I* am (existentially) in “the what” and “the how” of my writing and reading.

Kierkegaard's Words

It is of interest to Socrates how *he* lives, how he relates to *the truth*, and how his life and his connection to the truth can have a *saving effect* on his interlocutors. Kelly Jolley writes, “[Philosophy] does not exist [for Socrates] as a sort of idol of which [Socrates] would be the guardian and which he must defend. It exists rather in its living relevance to the Athenians.”²⁸ Just so, the literature Kierkegaard produces in varied profusion does not exist as a tribute to “the literary life” or as a gift to “the great tradition of literature” or to “the great tradition of philosophy.” These are not temples in which he wished to enshrine his texts and himself. On the best interpretation, his words were to exist in their “living relevance” to his townfolk or, more accurately, in their “living relevance” to *single individuals* in whose souls they lodged as a provocation, judge, and inspiration. Although he writes in veins that are in turn literary or aesthetic, ethical or philosophical, religious or counter-religious, and writes to bring these into conflict and repose, these are not *ultimate* categories of exploration or veneration for him.

Kierkegaard is Socratic. First and last he worships at no single shrine but inaugurates, for each reader, a trial of self-knowledge, self-resolution, self-realization, and selflessness. (The trial both is and is not “all about me.”) He

conducts trials of existence, where his subjectivity meets mine around love and responsibility, urgency, delight, and suffering. It is a trial of my existence, and yours, or in another of his favorite images, an invitation to sweep onto the floor for a solo dance before God, before such presence as can be pleased or displeased with the tilt of my soul. Kierkegaard's writings bring us to the dance, and perhaps demonstrate some steps,²⁹ but the rest is up to us—to *me*. So *his* manner of writing is in *our* service, in *my* service. In its poetry and philosophy, its comic mimicry and tearful pathos, it is a great gift, an existential contribution.

Notes

1. For years the Danish *Smule, Smuler* was translated “Fragments.” This suggests we might assemble the fragments into a larger system, or that a larger system or structure has been broken up. “Crumbs” or “trifles” are throwaways first and foremost. This suggests a lowly *place* in orders of *significance* rather than something in the order of parts-to-whole. It might also be translated “smidgens.”

2. See Edward F. Mooney, “Style and Pseudonymity in Kierkegaard,” in *Oxford Handbook to Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 10.

3. Louis Mackey titles his study *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971).

4. A measure of literary genius is the capacity to spawn *further* genius and to prompt inquiry into its own ancestral progenitors.

5. Eric Ziolkowski, *The Literary Kierkegaard* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2011).

6. Living with the anomaly of a literary-philosophical output is difficult enough. If it is also a *religious* output, this may be juggling too many categories. To keep the scope of my inquiry manageable, I will leave the *purely* religious texts (like the *Discourses*) to one side. Some texts are in limbo. *Fear and Trembling* takes up Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac, but that does not automatically make it a religious text. The pseudonym Johannes de Silentio is silent about many things, for instance how his outpourings *bear* on religiosity. Perhaps he narrates a horror-show *spectacle* that is highly *irreligious* or a parody of religious texts or a parody of philosophical texts. See Edward F. Mooney, *On Søren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time* (Aldershot, U.K.: Continuum, 2007), chaps. 2–4, where I argue that Kierkegaard can have a collaborative Christian-Socratic identity, and chap. 8, where I treat parts of *Fear and Trembling* as an irreligious spectacle.

7. Henry David Thoreau has a capacious sense of “the poetic.” He writes, “Yet poetry, though the last and finest result, is a natural fruit. As naturally as the oak bears an acorn, and the vine a gourd, man bears a poem, either spoken or done.” *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, ed. Carl F. Hovde, William L. Howarth, and Elizabeth Hall Witherell (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 91. Kierkegaard balks at a general endorsement of “poetic living” for fear it would endorse the life only of the aesthete or dandy.

8. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 85 and 93 (in secs. 15 and 17).

9. Robert Frost, "On Emerson," in *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1959), 112, quoted by Jamie M. Ferreira, *Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 1.

10. Quoted by Ferreira, *Kierkegaard*, 1.

11. Others in this gallery of pseudonyms include Victor Eremita, Constantin Constantius, Vigilius Haufniensis, and Anti-Climacus. See the discussion in Edward F. Mooney, "Pseudonyms and Style," in *Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 10.

12. Johannes de Silentio's (Kierkegaard's) term here, "Stemning" (SKS 4:105), is translated by the Hongs as "Exordium" (FT 9).

13. Lengthy accounts of the enigmas of *Fear and Trembling* are given in Edward F. Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling* (Albany: State University of New York, 1991), and in Mooney, *On Søren Kierkegaard*.

14. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). I do not want to invent or borrow a genre to cover Johannes de Silentio's creation. It is more important to emphasize an author peddling strange goods that challenge what writing should look like.

15. See n. 1.

16. The full title—including the subtitle—as rendered by the Hongs is slightly different: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to "Philosophical Fragments": A Mimical-Pathetical-Dialectical Compilation: An Existential Contribution* (CUP 2:xiii).—Ed.

17. Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 315. It can be called an "unscholarly" postscript insofar as its content often satirizes academic treatises and scholarly frames of mind, not just "scientific thinking" of the sort done in science labs.

18. For every smitten disciple of Socrates there were plenty who thought he was "only a sophist" and still others who thought his tomfoolery was a threat to the state. Kierkegaard's disquieting challenge to expectations might be seen as a threat to the city's moral-religious fiber. It exposed too much.

19. The final unnumbered pages push the pseudonym aside: now "S. Kierkegaard" claims to be its author. All that has been written seems to be revoked, thrown away, like Wittgenstein's ladder. See chapter 12, "Postscript: Humor Takes It Back," in Mooney, *On Søren Kierkegaard*.

20. Kierkegaard's appreciation of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* can count as an essay, even though it is folded into an unwieldy nonessay titled *Either/Or*, published under a pseudonym. His social analysis of nineteenth-century Copenhagen in *Two Ages* could also count as an essay. But these instances of straightforward "essay exposition" are rare in his oeuvre. George Steiner, a "man of letters," writes, as Kierkegaard might write, on love and desire, art and philosophy, mysticism and moral vision, self-deception, and goods. However, Kierkegaard would never be mistaken for a man of letters. Socially, he has no use for the literary clubs that could grant him the laurel "man of letters," and he insists on irking his public, thus attracting (at least in his lifetime) mainly disapprobation.

21. See Gordon Marino, "The Danish Doctor of Dread," *New York Times*, March 17, 2012.

22. See Robert Pippin, "On 'Becoming Who One Is' (and Failing): Proust's Problematic Selves," in *Philosophical Romanticism*, ed. Nikolas Kompridis (London: Routledge, 2006), 113–40.

23. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy*, trans. John Wild and James M. Edie (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 31–39. Kelly Dean Jolley develops Merleau-Ponty's discussions of Bergson's decision to stand up as a Jew and links it to the Socratic nature of philosophy in a discussion I encountered while floundering. A draft of his lecture, "Merleau-Ponty in Praise of Philosophy" (given August 31, 2012, Auburn University) is available at "Draft of MMP Talk," *Quantum Est in Rebus Inane*, August 31, 2012, <http://kellydean-jolley.com/2012/08/31/draft-of-mmp-talk/>. It was of immense help.

24. From his deathbed, looking back on all that lay behind, Kierkegaard writes, "The only analogy I have for what I am doing is Socrates. My task is the Socratic task of revising the definition of what it means to be a Christian" ("Min Opgave," *SKS* 13:405 / "My Task," *MLW* 341). The remark was penned in 1854. See my discussions in Mooney, *On Søren Kierkegaard*, chaps. 1–3.

25. Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy*, 36, quoted in Jolley, "Merleau-Ponty in Praise of Philosophy," 12.

26. Especially in the early dialogues, Socrates can seem less than serious, raising all sorts of questions and refusing to give answers. He says that his wisdom is to know nothing, and he seems to be in a persistent hunt for definitions, refusing to propose any himself, and to be content to refute the efforts of others—attracting and exasperating, equally.

27. See chapter 5, "Love, That Lenient Interpreter," in Mooney, *On Søren Kierkegaard*.

28. Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy*, 36, discussed by Jolley, "Merleau-Ponty in Praise of Philosophy," 12.

29. For a full discussion of this point, see Anne Margrete Fiskvik's essay on Kierkegaard's attitudes on dance in the present volume.—Ed.

