chapter 1

Introduction: Reading Kierkegaard

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813–1855) left behind a most unusual literary legacy. It is different from that of other great minds who left us intellectual projects that were in the traditional form of essays or treatises that could be straightforwardly mined for philosophical and theological insights and arguments. However difficult it might be to present the thought of people like Kant or Hegel, even acknowledging the scholarly differences of opinion that inevitably exist, the work of Kierkegaard is difficult to present for very different reasons. Given the remarkable variety of genres in which he writes, the counterpart to such traditional exposition and critique is the challenge of orienting and guiding readers in the activity of reading Kierkegaard's works.

Robert Frost once wrote that "a poetic philosopher or philosophical poet" was his "favorite kind of both,"[1] and Ludwig Wittgenstein suggested that "Philosophy ought really to be written only as a *poetic composition*."[2] It is interesting, therefore, to note that Kierkegaard presented himself not as a traditional philosopher or religious thinker, but as a kind of "poet" and as someone who was "in love" with his pen.[3] This is not incompatible with offering sound philosophical, religious, or psychological insights, but it does mean that we will have to be prepared to read his works a little differently. Kierkegaard's own description of the genres of his works is a sign that this is the case. We find, for example, a "Dialectical Lyric," "A Venture in Experimenting Psychology," "A Fragment of Philosophy," "A Mimical-Pathetical-Dialectical Compilation, an Existential Contribution," as well as *Works of Love* and "Discourses for Communion." Readers need to be alerted to certain facts about the writing, as well as to certain assumptions and strategies that inform the writing. I hope to present introductory accounts of the texts that will provide both encouragement for readers to turn to the originals and guidance for them when they do. I do not intend my brief introductions to spare readers the need of reading the texts.

In what follows I want to introduce Kierkegaard's thought, not by telling what he thought, but rather by showing *how* he thought. I want to consider how his texts are provocative performances or performative provocations. Although it might be said that every text is a performance of sorts, this is especially important in Kierkegaard's case since his work covers a variety of genres. A fruitful reading of these texts requires that we are sensitive to the "how" of the performance. I want to introduce readers to what I love about reading Kierkegaard by providing examples of the sorts of activities he engages in, and by providing enough of his own inimitable language and style to tempt readers to read (or re-read) the originals carefully.

Let me suggest the following reasons for picking up Kierkegaard's writings, knowing that the reader will have to judge for herself as the book proceeds. I read Kierkegaard for his *passionate* performances, as well as for the passionate ways he puts passion in question. That is, I read him for the ways in which he embodies a resistance to one-sidedness and to closure (he calls this his "dialectical" aspect). He does this by using literary strategies and techniques to unsettle us, to perplex us, to cause us to rethink things; he is always asking provocative questions and using unexpected inversions and comparisons, to make us uncomfortable in our security, to defamiliarize us with something we think we are familiar with already, to make problematical the totality, the system, the closed, the finished, the completed, and the finalized. He uses pictures that provoke the reader to do some work. He will paint a picture – then ask what is wrong with the picture. He will repeatedly ask us to imagine strange situations, saying what if someone who wanted to achieve X were to do Y, what would you think? He constantly invites the reader to do the work of making judgments or coming up with alternatives. His writings encourage us to appreciate the tension-filled nature of life.

Kierkegaard's works are full of challenges, posed through satire, sarcasm, and humor; there are passionate polemics. But there is always a complementary or underlying *compassion*. I think all his books could have the subtitle he gave to one of them, "For Upbuilding and Awakening." They are designed to build up or encourage, as well as awaken or provoke. In other words, they are designed to be appropriated by the reader. But that is precisely what makes it difficult for me to introduce them. Most of the time, I feel I am in a difficulty similar to that noted by one of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authors, Johannes Climacus, who considers the task of trying to paint a mythological figure in the armor that makes him invisible – as he says, "the point is the invisibility" (CUP, 174). How do you suggest that something is invisible? What features of its surroundings or background will need to be brought out in order to evoke the invisibility? One cannot simply paint the armor, and one cannot refuse to paint at all, leaving a blank space. All of Kierkegaard's

writings illustrate to some degree the problem of indirection he points to. And while Kierkegaard is usually quite artful in his indirection, it is difficult for me not to reduce it as I present it.

Every scholar who has ever worked on Kierkegaard's writings probably has felt pangs of conscience at the thought that he/she may be doing exactly the kind of analysis that Kierkegaard ridiculed or condemned. The only way to keep on going is to remind oneself that Kierkegaard appreciated the Socratic art of maieutics and it is possible to see what we scholars do as maieutic work – as being an occasion for others in the way that Kierkegaard is himself an occasion for us all. There is a kind of authority that is impossible to claim with respect to the study of these works.

I hope to provide enough analysis and commentary to indicate the fruitful perplexity that readers should expect to encounter, and to suggest why this can be a good thing rather than a frustrating thing. As will become increasingly apparent, we are faced with an authorship in which there is much ambiguity, many unresolved questions, no pat answers, no "results" we can easily summarize – a bit like life, actually. We should ask what these texts *do*. That is, we should shift the question from "What did the author want to do?" to "What did the author do?" or "What do these texts do?" Only then can we ask ourselves what we think of what they do.

This project is torn, however, between two impulses. On the one hand, I want the reader to discover these works for herself – to confront them (the title, the author and/or editor, the introductory guidance, and the text itself) as if for the first time. I want to show the reader how themes emerge in the writings themselves, *as* they emerge, rather than impose at the outset a list of the themes to be explored. And I want to treat each work as a particular. The problem with simply doing all that, however, is that the reader needs a little orientation up front about why she should bother to read Kierkegaard at all, and that involves suggesting how the reading may prove valuable. The reader also needs some preliminary sense of how the particulars fit into the whole, and what are the already existing practices of, and debates about, reading Kierkegaard. So there is a tension between what I need to say up front and what I try to save for the reader to discover for herself. What we have are texts that can be edifying, or entertaining, or shocking – and in some cases all three. The most I can do is prepare, orient, and guide the reader.

I The Visual Introduction

The first, and in one sense the most important, piece of guidance that can be given to a reader concerns the most unusual feature of Kierkegaard's

writing – namely, the variety of forms it takes. The best short "introduction to Kierkegaard" is found in the visual picture of his writings provided by a listing of all the works he authored, along with their dates (see the appendix at the end of this chapter). The titles and dates and "signatures" by themselves already reveal a great deal about why his writings have always had passionate readers – whether uncritical devotees, critical students, or intrigued analysts. It is a unique body of writings. Apart from the obviously intriguing names to which the books are attributed (Constantin Constantius, Johannes de Silentio, Johannes Climacus, Vigilius Haufniensis, Nicolaus Notabene, Anti-Climacus, H. H., Inter et Inter, and S. Kierkegaard) or with which they are associated (Victor Eremita, Hilarius Bookbinder, and S. Kierkegaard), there are provocative titles, like *Either – Or* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

Moreover, Kierkegaard's works can be sorted out into two columns ordered by date of publication. It is apparent from this that he wrote from beginning to end of his career two parallel sets of quite different kinds of writings, publishing them alongside each other. That is, one set of texts was written under a variety of ingenious pseudonyms, and a second set, predominantly "discourses" ("upbuilding"[4] or "Christian") was written in his own name (S. Kierkegaard), so that at any given point he would be writing/publishing one of the pseudonymous texts at about the same time as he was writing/publishing one of the upbuilding or Christian writings under his own signature. Often the corresponding sets would come out within weeks or months of each other, and once it happened on the very same day. If we look at the parallel lines of signed and pseudonymous works, we see a body of writings that appears to have been written and published very self-consciously. The arrangement does not look accidental; it looks like an authorship that, if not deliberately crafted according to a plan from the outset, at least was deliberately arranged in certain ways as it went along. The parallel lines of authorship are a reconstruction, to be sure, but that they can be so reconstructed shows that the resulting writings were not produced arbitrarily. By working with both sets of texts at the same time I hope to introduce readers to Kierkegaard's writings in a way that ensures that they never forget this distinctive feature of his authorship.

Many people, especially those interested in his philosophical and religious thought, have studied Kierkegaard under the aspect of one of his famous pseudonyms, for example, Johannes Climacus. Others have been less aware of the pseudonymous aspect of his writing and have concentrated on one of his famous books, like *Fear and Trembling* or *The Sickness unto Death*, uncritically attributing to "Kierkegaard" responses to questions about the relation between ethics and religion or

about the existential transformation of the self. And so, there has been a huge literature on "Kierkegaardian" themes like subjectivity, the "leap" to faith, anxiety, the teleological suspension of the ethical in the name of religion, and the relations between esthetic, ethical, and religious ways of living. Others, fewer but the numbers are growing, have studied the "upbuilding discourses" and the "Christian discourses" written in his own name. To readers who are only familiar with the pseudonymous works these discourses will be a revelation. The "upbuilding" discourses, in particular, have been accorded a special importance recently: it has been argued that "upbuilding, or edification, is the central theme of Kierkegaard's authorship"[5] and that the upbuilding discourses provide a "privileged viewpoint on the authorship as a whole."[6] To my knowledge no one has published a book-length study of the entire parallel track of writings in their relation to one another,[7] and yet this product with two different kinds of writing in tandem over a career makes Kierkegaard absolutely unique in the history of thought.

The character of the uniqueness that I am claiming for Kierkegaard should be clarified. In assessing this dual or parallel collection of works, I acknowledge that Kierkegaard was not writing in a literary vacuum – his writings show a mastery of Danish literature and an extensive knowledge of contemporary German literature. Pseudonymity and satire, for example, are found in the Danish and German contexts familiar to Kierkegaard, but his use of it was a pervasive and continuing dimension of his writings throughout his life as an author. Although he builds on the earlier examples of certain genres and approaches, he outdistances each of these individual authors in his variety and consistent use of certain literary techniques.[8] For this reason, the peculiar duality of his authorship has no rival.

This is not to claim that what he did is more important than what other thinkers have done, and it is certainly not to claim that he was equally successful in all he did – it is simply to be unapologetically astonished by what he did. Even in Nietzsche's case, where the departures from traditional form and style are evident – provocative and flamboyant aphorisms as well as vitriolic diatribes – the elements of his authorship are at least presented in his own name (including *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* which has lots of clever deconstruction going on that puts in question any easy identification of Zarathustra with Nietzsche). Something a little more similar to the case of Kierkegaard may be found in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which has generated a lot of literature about which of the three dialogue partners (Philo, Cleanthes, or Demea) stands for Hume. In this case, it is pretty clear that they are all Hume in some sense, and all not Hume in another sense – each of the characters created by Hume voices views that Hume

can be otherwise documented as holding or rejecting. That is, in the case of both Hume and Nietzsche we can assess correspondences between the views of their creations and their own straightforwardly presented views, but it is not clear that there is ever a comparable straightforwardly presented Kierkegaard.

What else do we learn from the visual representation in the appendix to this chapter? First, each set is distinctive: there is the explicit pseudonymity of one set of writings whereas the other set in the parallel listing is signed S. Kierkegaard. The bulk of this latter set consists of what Kierkegaard generically titled "discourses." If we unpack these volumes of "discourses," we will find about 87 religious discourses – either "upbuilding" or "Christian." This signed track of writing shows clearly that Kierkegaard did not become interested in religion at some late stage of writing. The "discourse" differs markedly as a genre from the pseudonymous writings. Although it might be possible to raid these discourses for irony and satire and parody, it seems implausible to think that they are repositories of these literary strategies in the same way as the pseudonymous writings are. Most of them explicitly address New Testament passages, and some begin with a prayer; indeed, they look so much like traditional sermons that Kierkegaard almost invariably insists in their prefaces that they are not sermons, since he lacks the authority for that. Moreover, of the 87 discourses, Kierkegaard delivered four of them in church services. Seven are subtitled "Christian Discourses," and 28 others are explicitly assembled under the rubric "Christian Discourses." One volume of 15 "deliberations, in the form of discourses" addresses the divine commandment to love the neighbor. The visual representation in the appendix shows that there are writings *about religion* from the beginning, and more importantly that there was *religious writing* from the beginning. Even if the author S. Kierkegaard were to be distinguishable from the man Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, these writings are in a different class from the pseudonyms, even the most Christian of the pseudonyms.

It is worth noting that under the rubric of writings signed by S. Kierkegaard, we find not only such religious discourses but also quite a different genre of writing that has attracted attention to Kierkegaard. These are the writings that have generally been associated with what has been called Kierkegaard's "attack on Christendom."[9] The challenge Kierkegaard issued in 1851 (*For Self-Examination*) was eventually followed by his assault in the more public media. During the last years of his life (1854–5), he produced 21 newspaper articles and then 10 more volumes of his own pamphlet series supported by public subscription. These late writings express a very polemical (at times vitriolic) response to the established (state) church in Denmark, but their content is not new. As we shall see, the outrage expressed in these writings is of a

piece with Kierkegaard's earlier frustration with what he took to be a dangerous misunderstanding of Christianity.

I do not call attention to the different kinds of writing to separate them, as if they are parallel tracks that never touch or influence each other. It is not as if a university professor adopts a pen name and writes detective novels that have no relation to the academic research she publishes; even in such a case, if both strands began at the same time and continued over a career, it would be hard to imagine that the writings did not mutually influence each other in some way. In the case of Kierkegaard, the pseudonymous and signed writings interweave through each other in interesting ways: a given theme initially explored in a pseudonymous work may then be developed in the discourses or sometimes the other way round.

This visual picture of the writing also provides a different vantage-point on Kierkegaard's religious discourses – for example, the current presentation of the first 18 upbuilding discourses in a single volume allows one to compare the discourses with each other, but it fails to give the reader any sense of their original publication by Kierkegaard in separate small groups of two, three, or four discourses, and obscures the relation between the individual sets of discourses and the other works Kierkegaard was writing at about the same time. The visual picture gives a better sense of the chronological relation between the sets of discourses and the pseudonymous works.

Finally, another important benefit of presenting these contemporaneous strands together is that it introduces the reader to the vexing question of the pseudonymous authorship which scholars wrestle with, but does so in a way that shows that it is not simply an eccentric technical issue but rather affects the very heart of one's understanding of Kierkegaard's thought. Kierkegaard left us a very mixed bag of writings, with an intriguing array of signatures. Kierkegaard wrote a book and signed it "S. Kierkegaard." Kierkegaard wrote another book and signed it "Johannes de Silentio." Kierkegaard wrote yet another book and signed it "Anti-Climacus, edited by S. Kierkegaard." If we clearly distinguish the pseudonymous presentations of ethics from the religious presentations of ethics, this will prevent even a beginner from making certain mistakes – e.g., conflating "Kierkegaard's ethic" not only with the ethic proposed by Judge William in *Either – Or*, but also with the ethic proposed in *Fear and Trembling* by Johannes de Silentio.

The question whether there is a unity to all of Kierkegaard's writings interests many readers, but the visual picture leaves open the question of whether (as he claimed in his retrospective account of his activity as an author) all his writings, including the pseudonymous ones, were "in the service of Christianity."[10] That question cannot be decided on the basis of the visual representation.

II The Contemporary Discussion – Kierkegaard the Writer

Although I want to avoid prejudging these texts for the reader, it is probably helpful to preface the examination of the texts with a brief acknowledgement of the contemporary situation in which Kierkegaard scholarship finds itself. An introduction to Kierkegaard's writings done today can avail itself of a marked renaissance in Kierkegaard scholarship during the last few decades. The new directions in Kierkegaard research have benefited from three relatively recent developments. The first was the completion in 2000 of a critical edition begun in 1978 of all the major works in English, which made the writings accessible to a larger audience.[11] The second development was the concentrated attention to the original Danish manuscripts themselves. Much painstaking research into the Danish Royal Library's collection of Kierkegaard's manuscripts – research into the sketches, drafts, printer's copies, and proofs – began in 1994 and continues in a new Danish edition of Kierkegaard's writings, *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, spearheaded in Copenhagen by the Søren Kierkegaard Research Center.[12] While English non-scholars will not be going to this Danish edition, several general benefits to Kierkegaard scholarship have accrued from this research.

The explanatory notes to the Danish edition document the complex dialogue that Kierkegaard had with other authors, theological, philosophical, and literary, as well as with the current events of his day – they reveal the entire intellectual and political background to his writing. For example, it has become clearer that the occasions for much of Kierkegaard's philosophical diatribes were Danish Hegelians, rather than the German philosopher Hegel as such. That is, although Kierkegaard did read some Hegel, he is best understood as responding to people who were inspired by Hegel.[13] Moreover, the researchers for the new *Skrifter* edition have uncovered much detail that is relevant to the dating and composition of the various writings; this shows us that Kierkegaard was often working on several texts at once, going back and forth between them.[14] For those who are interested in the person of Kierkegaard the writer, this research also tells a fascinating story of the quirkiness of Kierkegaard's own writing: his remorseless revisions, his last-minute changes, his micro-management of typographical printing details. Over the years then we have been getting a clearer picture of Kierkegaard the writer – often finicky, sometimes vain, and always passionate.

One important implication of this research has to do with the crafting of the texts of the authorship. Attention to the various versions of the Danish originals shows that Kierkegaard often changed his mind about how to sign his works. He sometimes began a work under his own name, changing it to a pseudonym only at the last minute before it went to

the printers. Sometimes he went through several variations whose scratching out we can still see in the originals. As a result, we need to acknowledge that the presence of pseudonyms should nuance any appreciation of the authorship, but we also need to be careful not to take the pseudonyms flatfootedly either. For example, if one knows nothing of the pseudonymous nature of the authorship, one will likely take *Philosophical Fragments* to present "Kierkegaard's" position on the issues discussed. When one becomes aware that the author, Johannes Climacus, is one of Kierkegaard's many pseudonymous creations, it is tempting to conclude that now we should read it differently and that we know exactly how to do that. For example, since Johannes Climacus tells us (in his *Postscript* to *Philosophical Fragments*) that he is not a Christian, we should be very wary of thinking that Johannes Climacus gets the portrayal of Christianity (indirect as it may be) right. That is, one will be suspicious about how to take Climacus's claims. Then, lo and behold, one sees a physical copy of the *Philosophical Fragments* signed by S. Kierkegaard; researchers have discovered the draft from the day before it went to the printers, at which time it still had Kierkegaard's name as author. One seems to come full circle by learning that only at the last minute before sending it to the publisher did Kierkegaard change it to be authored by Johannes Climacus. It is not clear why he made the change, but the shift in signature does suggest that he did not begin by first creating the pseudonymous author and then writing the book in that distinctive (non-Christian) voice. And this is true of other works.[15]

However, this does not at all mean that whether he used a pseudonym was unimportant to him. Pseudonymity signals to the reader that the text is a calculated pedagogical project, with authorial distance, so pseudonymity is crucial to the ways in which Kierkegaard oriented his readers. Moreover, we should not give up our hermeneutics of suspicion when reading the *Fragments* – there are still numerous literary devices and twists going on in the text that need to be appreciated, regardless of the signature. There are levels and levels of appreciation of the strategy of pseudonymity. In this same vein, we know that Kierkegaard expressed regret that he had published under a pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, a text that he later wished he could put under his own name (as he had originally had it in the final draft). Finally, we have evidence that Kierkegaard toyed with the idea of many pseudonyms that he never actually used – he seems to have just liked the sound of some of the names. My discussion will show the dangers of any naïve failure to pay attention to the pseudonyms, but at the same time it will challenge simplistic assumptions about the pseudonyms, as well as qualify post-modern interpretations in which even "S. Kierkegaard" is taken to be a pseudonym. All of this research may seem irrelevant to people who care

only about "the ideas" in the books and don't care whose name is signed to them, but pseudonymity is a literary strategy, and if we cease to care about the literary strategies in the texts, we will fail to understand the ideas in the text.

Although I have been concentrating on highlighting the dual strands of Kierkegaard's authorship – the signed and the pseudonymous – it is important to note that his writing includes not only these works, but also a large amount of journal and notebook material, as well as some correspondence. The new Danish edition of Kierkegaard's writings explicitly intended to treat the writing as a unity, to include them all in a single edition, in acknowledgement of the fact that this "extra" material found in the manuscripts was not of a unique private status. Kierkegaard fully expected that some day some of that too would be available to the public – he was, in a sense, always writing for others. This does not mean that all the writings are leveled to a single common denominator – it is still important to make distinctions between the kinds of writing – but it does suggest that there is no special cache of writings that give privileged authoritative access to Kierkegaard's private intentions and motives. There is no doubt that these writings are valuable for research if used rightly; there is much in them that is fascinating and curious, as well as informative and provocative, and I recommend them highly to interested readers.[16] I will not, however, be relying on them; even when the "extra" material is written with others in mind, I think it best not to unduly complicate things by trying to integrate this material into an introduction.

This leads us to the third development in Kierkegaard studies. We currently have a climate in which work on Kierkegaard has benefited from a couple of decades of literary attention. That is, the study of Kierkegaard's texts has been enriched by the attention given them by people who have not only philosophical and religious interests, but also (sometimes especially) literary interests. Recent analyses have demonstrated the pervasive use of literary strategies like irony, humor, and indirect communication, as well as a deeper appreciation of the strategy of pseudonymity.

One of the strengths of the literary approaches to Kierkegaard's writings is that they have shifted the ground away from naïve readings. The attempt to read Kierkegaard's mind (to determine authorial intention through appeal to biography or to journal entries) should be rightly set aside. The practice of reading pseudonymous works without sensitivity to the presence of satire, parody, irony, and humor, should also be guarded against. But there is a danger that focusing attention on literary strategies can draw us out of our literary innocence in such a way that we substitute literary suspicion for literary sensitivity, and thereby limit our reading options. For example, sometimes the literary approach leads

people to ask whether Kierkegaard's writings were all put on for show – of cleverness, or wit, or one-upmanship, or revenge. It leads people to posit an illegitimate dichotomy, asking whether a work is "really" about his broken engagement (his shame about his father, the need to justify himself), *or* whether it is "really" about religion. The question then would be what to make of the writings that have given so much edification to people, changed their lives, awakened them, so to speak, to the importance of paradox, passion, despair, and the infinite. But acknowledging Kierkegaard's literary concerns does not preclude taking his works seriously. One danger of a hermeneutic of suspicion is that it can obscure the ways in which a writer's various experiences, interests, and concerns can coincide in the space of his artistry.

There are, indeed, two kinds of writings – pseudonymous and signed – but both are done by a master literary craftsman. It is not possible to separate Kierkegaard's literary works from his religious/philosophical works – he was literary "all the way down," even in his religious and philosophical writings. Therefore, I want to explore the ways in which his literary sensibilities go hand in hand with all the dimensions of his life and issue in a complex overdetermination of his writing. By overdetermination I mean simply that there is not necessarily one single thing going on at any given time, not one single motivation informing a given text. We are embodied, contextualized human beings who cannot neatly compartmentalize the various dimensions of our life, so it is not surprising that more than a single motivation or a single concern would inform a given piece of writing.

Let me use a suggestion made by Kierkegaard himself to illustrate what this "overdetermination" might mean. The general idea that one's various life concerns can be expressed in one's literary pursuits is found in the first work Kierkegaard ever published – *From the Papers of One Still Living* (1838), a review of Hans Christian Andersen's novel, *Only a Fiddler*. That review clearly raises the question of the relation between the quality of an author's life and the quality of an author's writing. It asks: What is true poetry, the poetically true? What is good writing? What is genius? What is art? Kierkegaard makes a striking contrast between two ways of writing, two different uses of one's life experiences: in "the poetically true," one's experiences (living to the "first power") are "transubstantiated" (living to the "second power"); he contrasts this with the case where one's experiences are "undigested," "unappropriated," "unfiltered" (FPOSL, 84). The view that life is appropriated experience contests both the rationalism and the romanticism of Kierkegaard's day: in order to be appropriated, there must be both immediacy and reflection, and whereas rationalism lacks the indispensable immediacy, romanticism lacks the equally indispensable reflection on immediacy.

Kierkegaard's critique of Andersen's esthetic failures reveals his view of the inseparability of the esthetic and the authentic – the true esthetic is not vain or self-centered. Kierkegaard's accusations are revealing. He suggests that "instead of carrying through his reflection, he [Andersen] on the contrary encloses himself in a very small space of it," a space which prevents development because it cyclically repeats itself (FPOSL, 74). True artistry, on the contrary, is suffering life through to the second power. In short, Kierkegaard's view of the demands of literary art and its relation to life seems to be one way of making sense of the concept of "esthetic earnestness" that he uses in a letter to his friend Emil Boesen: "I have far too much sense of and reverence for what stirs in a human being not to guard it with just as much esthetic as ethical earnestness."[17]

If we take seriously the notion of "transubstantiation" of lived experience in literature, we will find it difficult to continue simplistically raising the question of "either/or" too often addressed to Kierkegaard's writings. The question whether Kierkegaard was exercising his literary craft *rather than* exploring a religious or philosophical or personal concern does not make sense. The fact that Kierkegaard was a self-conscious author, a literarily minded author, is not incompatible with his being an author who had religious or philosophical or psychological aims. We need to do justice to Kierkegaard's wide variety of concerns and interests: I propose that we call them religious/theological, philosophical, psychological, literary, and personal. It should be clear that I am using the word "literary" to point to two different things – on the one hand, to point to a literary approach, and on the other hand, to point to literary interests. Kierkegaard had literary ambitions – he wanted to be accepted in Danish literary circles; he was disgruntled about not being part of the reigning literary alliances. He wanted to be known as a great writer. But at a different level, at the level of his approach to his writing, even this interest in literary reputation was "transubstantiated" into literature. The category of "personal" here covers things like his relation to his family, and to his fiancée – his private life. Although one could say that things like cultivating a literary reputation and reacting to the goings-on in the competing literary circles of his day were also personal, still these are different from the most important personal relationships he had. But even if we can distinguish these categories conceptually, they are not separate in practice – all his concerns had a bearing on each other in some sense. And ultimately, all his experiences coincided within the space of his artistry; his life was inflected in literary art.

Let me suggest the following heuristic device for thinking about the overdetermination or multivalence in the texts – namely, concentric circles. Immanuel Kant used the image of concentric circles in his book, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, to explain the relation

between natural and revealed religion. Kant suggested that we "regard [revelation] as the *wider* sphere of faith, which includes within itself the second [historical] as a *narrower* one (not like two circles external to one another, but like concentric circles)."[18] This image is also found in one of Kierkegaard's earliest works, *Either – Or.* The image of "concentric circles" conveys the notion of several thoughts with the same center. The image specifically rules out the idea of overlapping circles (as in Venn diagrams). Concentric circles have the same center. The circles may be larger or smaller, with different ranges, different ramifications and implications, but they all have the same center. In the case of Kierkegaard's authorship, I am suggesting that the center of the circles is the author's life experience. This includes his appropriated experience of learning about the experiences of others. This rich center of life experience is composed of events and acts that involve his ongoing relation with God, his ongoing self-education, his attempts to deal with the literary establishment in Copenhagen, his philosophical questionings, etc. A single event or act can have various descriptions – it might be described as a religious ordeal, a personal heartbreak, a psychological problem, or material providing philosophical insight. All of these could be described as events or acts that need to be coped with through a literary re-appropriation or "transubstantiation."

The image of concentric circles is one way of reminding ourselves that, as an author, Kierkegaard expressed all his dimensions – religious, philosophical, psychological, literary, and personal. Individual texts may express some of Kierkegaard's concerns more prominently than others – for example, the text *Prefaces* seems a literary *tour de force*, while a text like *Fear and Trembling* (the text most people will probably be familiar with) has many layers of things deeper than mere amusement. But most of the works reveal that the author had religious, philosophical, and existential needs (to be loved, to be accepted by the literary elite, to find meaning in life). At heart he was, as he says of himself, "a kind of poet" – a writer whose every experience had to be raised to the level of artistic expression. He found himself in his writing – in all his dimensions. The hypothesis that he was educated by his activity of writing provides a very fruitful way of understanding the multivalence of the authorship in terms of concentric circles.

Since my project is to guide or orient the reader, my introduction should probably stop here. The meaning of the overdetermination of the authorship will become clearer as we see the differing degrees to which all the concerns of Kierkegaard's life are represented in the individual texts. Moreover, all of Kierkegaard's writing calls for individual engagement by the reader, so rather than give you what Kierkegaard would call "results," i.e., an *a priori* rehearsal of various Kierkegaardian themes and tensions and strategies, I turn in the following chapters to

the texts themselves. I think the "taste and see" introduction is the best, with its examples of wit, irony, psychological insight, philosophical distinctions, graphic narrative, religious sensitivity, and ethical earnestness. Our reading of the performances in each text will allow Kierkegaard's themes, tensions, and strategies to emerge at the relevant places in the authorship.

The chapters that immediately follow will address those texts that officially begin Kierkegaard's authorship. The year 1843 was a decisive one for the 30-year-old Kierkegaard – in that single year he published three full-length literary works (under three different pseudonyms) and three volumes of religious discourses (under his own signature). But perhaps it is more accurate to say that what preceded 1843 was decisive for him. What formed the man who spouted what he himself termed a veritable "torrent" or "showerbath" of writing?

A brief look at the public facts.[19] Baptized and confirmed in the state church, Kierkegaard was brought up in a religious household. His university studies were initially philosophical and literary. He did some early writing that revealed his literary aspirations and his polemical style, and he published a book-length review of a novel by Hans Christian Andersen in 1838; in that same year his father died. He shifted his focus and began two years of theological studies and examinations culminating in his graduate degree in theology in 1840, with a dissertation entitled "On the Concept of Irony" as part of his Magister Artium (later officially made into a Doctor of Philosophy). He then spent two semesters in the Royal Pastoral Seminary (1840–41) and received his certificate to preach, giving a sermon in Holmens Church, January 12, 1841, on the Scriptural verse "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." At the age of 27 he became engaged to a 16-year-old girl, Regine Olsen (September 1840), and after a little more than a year he broke off the engagement (October 1841). He immediately left Copenhagen and attended philosophical lectures in Berlin. He came back to Copenhagen in 1842 with a large amount of writing in hand, and then came all the publications of 1843.

Many commentators highlight the broken engagement when they treat Kierkegaard's writings, especially his early writings. There is no doubt that this was a formative experience for him, and it would be surprising if these early texts were not marked by his decision and its aftermath. In the market town of Copenhagen this personal event was not private – it was common knowledge and it was apparently a rather shocking thing at the time to break a publically announced engagement. But it would be naïve to think that this is all these writings are about. Even this briefest of looks at the years preceding 1843 shows that Kierkegaard had strong philosophical, theological, and literary interests, and that he had suffered other personal losses, not the least of which was

the loss of his father, to whom he dedicated the religious discourses of 1843 (and many thereafter). We, as readers, cannot read Kierkegaard's mind – nor should we try. But it would be strange if these losses did not mark his early writing as least as much as the famous "engagement crisis." He was exploring personal religious questions and making decisions about theological plans in the years before and during the writing of these works. There is every reason to think that everything he knew and did provided the material of the concentric circles of his literary appropriation of his life.

Let us turn now to *Either – Or* and the two discourses that accompanied it. After deriving some lessons in reading Kierkegaard from these performances, we will turn to the other writings of 1843.

notes

1 Robert Frost, "On Emerson," in *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1959), p. 112.
2 *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 24.
3 Preface to *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* (1851); LD, p. 209, letter to Kierkegaard's cousin Julie Thomsen, February 1847.
4 These may be more familiar in their earlier English translation as "edifying" discourses.
5 IKC, vol. 5, p. 1.
6 George Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 35.
7 One of my graduate students, Glenn Kirkconnell, did this for the early part of the authorship (*Either – Or* to *Philosophical Fragments*) in his 2002 dissertation, recently published as *Kierkegaard on Ethics and Religion* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008).
8 For example, Kierkegaard far exceeds the literary stylings of a master to whom he repeatedly appealed – the unusual eighteenth-century German thinker, Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788), whose eccentric use of wit and occasional pseudonymity Kierkegaard deeply appreciated.
9 Although Kierkegaard never wrote a book entitled *Attack upon "Christendom,"* these writings were collected under that title by Walter Lowrie in 1956, so English-speaking readers may be familiar with them in that format.
10 PV, p. 24.
11 Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. (Princeton University Press, 1978–2000).
12 *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, Anne Mette Hansen, and Johnny Kundrup (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1997–). Published by Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret.
13 Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

14 I depend heavily on the documentation found in the *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbooks* devoted to each text, put out by the Kierkegaard Research Center at the University of Copenhagen.
15 This was true of *Philosophical Fragments*, *The Concept of Anxiety*, *The Sickness unto Death*, and even *Practice in Christianity*.
16 *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers* presents some of this material in English, arranged by topics; a new critical edition of the journals and notebooks is currently being prepared for Princeton University Press, headed by Bruce Kirmmse, which will draw on more of the original materials and employ a chronological format.
17 LD, p. 121, letter to Emil Boesen, January 16, 1842.
18 *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), preface to the 2nd edn., p. 11.
19 Several important biographies should be noted: Walter Lowrie, *A Short Life of Kierkegaard* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944); Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce Kirmmse (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Appendix

The Writings of Søren Kierkegaard

Pseudonymous	**Signed**
Either – Or – February 1843	*Two Upbuilding Discourses* – May 1843
Repetition – October 16, 1843	*Three Upbuilding Discourses* – October 16, 1843
Fear and Trembling – October 16, 1843	*Four Upbuilding Discourses* – December 1843
	Two Upbuilding Discourses – March 1844
	Three Upbuilding Discourses – June 1844
Philosophical Fragments – June 13, 1844	
The Concept of Anxiety – June 17, 1844	
Prefaces – June 17, 1844	
	Four Upbuilding Discourses – August 1844
Stages on Life's Way – April 1845	*Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* – April 1845
Concluding Unscientific Postscript – February 1846	
	Two Ages: A Literary Review – March 1846
	Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits – March 1847

Works of Love – September 1847
Christian Discourses – April 1848

The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress – July 1848
Either – Or (2nd edn.) – May 14, 1849
Two Ethical-Religious Essays – May 1849
The Sickness unto Death – July, 1849

The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air – May 14, 1849

Three Discourses at Communion – November 1849

Practice in Christianity – September 1850

An Upbuilding Discourse – December 1850
Two Discourses at Communion – August 1851
On My Work as an Author – August 1851
For Self-Examination – September 1851
Articles in *The Fatherland* – 1854–5
The Moment – 1855
"The Changelessness of God" – September 1855

Posthumous publications
The Point of View for My Work as an Author – [1848] 1859
Judge for Yourself! [1851–2], 1876

The Pseudonymous Authorship

Either – Or – A Fragment of Life, edited by Victor Eremita
Repetition – A Venture in Experimenting Psychology, by Constantin Constantius
Fear and Trembling – A Dialectical Lyric, by Johannes de Silentio
Philosophical Fragments – A Fragment of Philosophy, by Johannes Climacus
The Concept of Anxiety – A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin, by Vigilius Haufniensis
Prefaces – Light Reading for People in Various Estates According to Time and Opportunity, by Nicolaus Notabene
Stages on Life's Way – Studies by Various Persons, Compiled, forwarded to the press, and published by Hilarius Bookbinder
Concluding Unscientific Postscript – A Mimical-Pathetical-Dialectical Compilation, an Existential Contribution, by Johannes Climacus
The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress, by Inter et Inter
Two Ethical-Religious Essays, by H. H.
The Sickness unto Death – A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening, by Anti-Climacus, edited by S. Kierkegaard
Practice in Christianity, by Anti-Climacus, edited by S. Kierkegaard