

WHAT IS 'AN EXISTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION'?¹

Edward F. Mooney²

Abstract

What does Kierkegaard – or his pseudonym Johannes Climacus – mean when he announces, in the *Postscript's* subtitle, that the book will provide “an Existential Contribution”? The varied history of ‘existential philosophy’ no doubt erupts from this casual end to a subtitle. Rather than look at the contents of Kierkegaard’s books for an answer, I look at their strange and unsettling titles, subtitles, and author-attributions. They give important evidence for my claim that an existential contribution is a Socratic contribution. The contents of these books arrive in distinctive ‘wrappings’ that foreshadow and effect a subtle Socratic, existential contribution.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, Socrates, Existential Contributions, Existential Resolutions, Unsettled Identities, Kierkegaard’s Book Titles, Kierkegaard’s Pseudonyms.

Kierkegaard lives on as a figure with a biography that gets retold generation-to-generation. He also lives on as a shadow behind an impressive sequence of books that get studied generation-to-generation. What sorts of books did he write? What sort of writer was he?

For answers, a biographical snapshot gives little help. After completing an apprenticeship at the university, Kierkegaard didn’t become a parson, professor, or lawyer – an editor, journalist, or dramatist. He wrote from none of these social positions. Of course he became a writer of books that over time have gathered a devoted following. But what *kind* of writer was he? The pseudonym Kierkegaard dubs as author of *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes *de silentio*, calls himself a “freelancer.” But what, exactly, is *that* – other than a writer who is unwilling, or unable, to be tied down as a dramatist, novelist, poet, or critic? He completed a successful university apprenticeship, earning the equivalent of a modern Ph. D., and might have become a professor knows for his academic philosophical or theological tracts. But Kierkegaard

¹ An early version of this essay will appear in *Kierkegaard, Literature, and the Arts*, ed. E. Ziolkowski, Cambridge (forthcoming).

² Edward F. Mooney is past President of the Kierkegaard Society of North America, retired from the Departments of Religion and Philosophy, Syracuse University, and visiting Professor at Tel Aviv University and Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Fields of interest: Kierkegaard, Thoreau.

never put his training to work in a recognized trade or career. To call him 'a writer' does little to tie down what *sort* of books he wrote.

I. What *sort* of writer, what *sort* of books?

What *kind* of book do we handle when we pick up one of his volumes? Can we tell from the cover whether we're handling poetry or literature, philosophy or theology, or something else that defies our usual cubbyholes for classifying books? Some titles look more philosophical – *Philosophical Crumbs*, *The Concept of Irony* – some more theological – *Works of Love*, "The Changelessness of God". But many are just baffling – *Either/Or*, *Prefaces*, *Repetition*.

Setting the theological aside, we might try to decide if Kierkegaard is a kind of philosophical poet, perhaps "a kind of poet." Of course, he's not a straightforward poet, someone who writes only poetry; and he has too much literature or poetry in his productions to be an out-and-out straightforward philosopher. If we shelve him with the philosophers, it would be with Montaigne or Nietzsche rather than Descartes or Hume. Calling him 'a kind of poet' (as well as 'a kind of philosopher' lets him be figurative, evocative, allusive, elusive, and enigmatic in a way denied to a standard essayist or philosopher.³

Why value the "evocative, allusive, elusive" in a thinker? Well, a thinker might envy the poet's freedom, a 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 leeway. On the other hand, a thinker might *resent* the poet's careless way with cultural requirements of discipline and order. Plato warned against this hybrid – thinking as a kind of poetry or theater. Famously, he banishes poets from the state ordered by philosophy. Or so it *seems*: he did not rule out of order his *own* poetry, and Socrates, in his way, is certainly "evocative, allusive, elusive." 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" is just unphilosophical madness.⁴

Jamie Ferreira finds two writers who *prefer* a volatile mix, and she cites them to introduce Kierkegaard. Robert Frost declares, "*a poetic philosopher or a philosophical poet are my favorite kind of both.*" And then she cites Wittgenstein: "*philosophy ought only to be written as a po-*

³ 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. C.F. Hovde, W.L. Howarth, and E.H. 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.

⁴ See F. Nietzsche: *The Birth of Tragedy*, transl. D. Smith, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000, 85; 93 (sections 15 and 17).

etic composition.”⁵ If poetry loosens philosophy that’s too straight-laced, philosophy can tighten the focus of poetry toward the systematic and orderly. The disruption of expectations that occurs when philosophy and poetry dance together can be disastrous, but it can also be delightfully revealing. Border-crossing and – erasing can expose important truths as well as instill anxiety.

II. A Socratic, existential contribution

I want to argue that Kierkegaard was a Socratic writer who wrote Socratic books. It’s in that light that I want to interpret his enigmatic claim that makes “an existential contribution.” The term “an existential contribution” is the final cadence in the mocking title and sub-title of his great *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. In case we’ve forgotten, the full title is *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Crumbs: a Mimic-pathetic-dialectical disquisition – an Existential Contribution*. There is both philosophy and a poetic wit in play here, both seriousness and irony not to mention comedy. We’ve asked what makes something “an existential contribution.” We’ll proceed toward an answer. But it’s worth noting that this is the first time in the Western philosophical canon – so far as I know – that an action or gesture is called ‘existential.’ Sartre and Jaspers will build on this seed, dropped by one Johannes Climacus almost offhandedly in Denmark in 1851.

With Climacus in particular and Kierkegaard more generally we have Socratic writing – so I claim. And a Socratic writer makes an ‘existential contribution.’ Johannes Climacus, as a Socratic writer promises to make things difficult. When life is leveled out, smoothly unproblematic, *comme il faute*, we need a Socrates or Climacus to raise problems – questions that may well outstrip answers, dilemmas we might call “existential.” This is the existential contribution Climacus or Socrates might make. So we have a tentative answer to our original query. What kind of writer is Kierkegaard? He’s a Socratic writer. And what is the mark of a Socratic writer? It’s one who makes an existential contribution.

III. Trouble-making misfits

The most natural way to unravel what an existential contribution might be is to look at the contents of *Concluding Postscript*, and of some other of the impressive sequence of books he produced rapid fire over a decade. But there is another quite illuminating alternative, one that has received little notice. Rather than seek evidence in the insides of the books for Kierkegaard being a Socratic writer who makes an existential contribution, I want to start with the outsides, with the covers of the books – with their wrapping, or packaging. Rather than crack the book

⁵ J.M. Ferreira: *Kierkegaard*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2009, 1.

open, I want to look at titles and subtitles, attributed authors or pseudonyms, the tactile heft of the books (or lack of it).⁶

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' interlocutors are left puzzling over missing definitions.

Kierkegaard's readers are left puzzling over texts that are missing their identifying labels and purposes. The job of sorting new arrivals for the library shelves was to have been simple and straightforward. With Kierkegaard's texts, it's not at all simple or 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 pseudonyms 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 Nicholas Note Bene?⁷

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 chatting with a child, like spitting out a window"⁸ But I suspect he is pulling our leg. After all, we might equally think that the *Postscript* or *Fear and Trembling* weren't entirely serious, were like "tuning a guitar." In fact, an early section of *Fear and Trembling* is called – exactly – "attunement." His feints, his intimating that it is all a joke, provoke our anxious parries.

⁶ Kelly Jolley reports, tongue in cheek, that all he wants is "the box the world's delivered in." Ultimately, we want what's inside Kierkegaard's books. But the boxes deserve study not just for what they contain but for what they are in the own right.

⁷ Others in this gallery of pseudonyms include Victor Eremita, Constantine Constantius, Vigilius Haufniensis, and Anti-Climacus. See the discussion in Edward F. Mooney: Pseudonyms and Style, in: *Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. J. Lippitt and G. Pattison, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013, chap. 10.

⁸ S. Kierkegaard: *Prefaces*, transl. T. Nichol, Princeton 1997, 5.

He calls *Prefaces* the work of “a light-hearted ne’er-do-well”⁹ 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 Mt. Moriah. Kierkegaard must be defending Abraham’s shocking and even servile compliance. 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.¹⁰ 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,’ or ‘the tragic,’) and barely concealed farce. It is burlesque, or what Bakhtin calls “the carnivalesque.”¹¹

Kierkegaard is a *literary* genius as well as being an astute philosopher, a withering social critic, and a profound diagnostician of the soul. He endlessly invents counter-genres, para-books, unclassifiable publications that question our sense of various 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.

IV. 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 nearly 600 page tome 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*,¹² 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*. Open it, and we

⁹ Kierkegaard, op. cit., 6.

¹⁰ 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 idem, *On Søren Kierkegaard*.

¹¹ M. 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. More important is to emphasize an author peddling strange goods that challenge what writing should look like.

¹² See n. 1 above.

discover what looks like a scholarly tome, full of sections and sub-sections, appearing systematic and self-important, hardly “mere crumbs” or “fragments.” In his masterful biography, Alastair Hannay suggests, *Concluding Unscholarly Addendum*.¹³

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?¹⁴ Kierkegaard insures – or hopes to insure – that if we go on reading, we can’t be blasé, as if canvassing this sort of thing is routine, an everyday encounter.

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 Q. E. D’s. The heart of its mission is forecast in the rest of the title. What is a “*Mimic-Pathetic-Dialectic Compilation – an Existential Contribution*”? (This doesn’t 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?

V. Not on 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 doesn’t answer our existential anxieties about who we are and where we’re going. The sub-title declares that the author makes an *existential* contribution. If we try to map his *oeuvre* onto larger cultural frameworks is an *objective* project, that is, a non-existential 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

¹³ *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, Cambridge: 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.

¹⁴ 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 me seen as a threat to the city’s moral-religious fiber. It exposed too much.

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 our own devices, and the withdrawal of helping hands, in its final pages, *Postscript* invites me, to leave it, relinquish it, as if the 600 pages, like *Prefaces*, were the work of "a light-hearted do-nothing."¹⁵ Like Socrates, the book stings and sings and departs.

Kierkegaard is attractive-unattractive, ordered-disordered, sober-comedic. He is an *enfant terrible*, a misfit who took pleasure in not fitting in, and was just as non-conformist when it came to the shape of his literary production. He does not trade in the common coin.¹⁶

If Kierkegaard eludes standard literary cubicles, he does no better when it comes to standard ways of writing philosophy. He can hold forth on subjectivity and objectivity, the individual and the crowd, the anguish of faith and the false assurance of careerism and church. But the faux-genres and non-genres that he adopts in delivering his insights are amusingly *bizarre*.

Kant gives us *The Critique of Pure Reason*, or *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic*. Stiff, but familiar. Kierkegaard gives us, in contrast, *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, nor 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 to 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*."¹⁷ The amorphous non-shapes of his literary products induce and replicate the anxiety that is part and parcel of freedom. (As Gordon Marino slyly dubs him,

¹⁵ The final unnumbered pages push the pseudonym aside: now, "S. Kierkegaard" claims to be the author of *Postscript*. All that has been written seems to be revoked, thrown away, like Wittgenstein's ladder. See my discussion "*Postscript: Humor takes it back*," in E.F. Mooney: *On Søren Kierkegaard*, Continuum, chap. 12.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard's appreciation of Mozart's Don Giovanni can count as an essay, even though it is folded into an unwieldy non-essay 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, and second, he insists on irking his public, thus attracting (at least in his lifetime) *disapprobation*.

¹⁷ S. Kierkegaard: *The Concept of Dread*, transl. W. Lowrie, Princeton 1944, 42.

Kierkegaard is “A Doctor of Dread.”¹⁸) We undergo vertigo, mild or screaming. Of course the doctor has our deep yearnings, our true interests at heart. This is all a forerunner and companion to my freedom.

VI. Making an existential contribution

Postscript has a final tag in its 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’s 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, and he typically moves from social critique to diagnostics of the soul. 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 a *second* phase, 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, has the register of my questioning shifted? I have to ask whether I have modulated from the excellent but non-intimate, objective question, “What is it to *exist* as a soul in love?” to another question that can be light years away. Do I find myself wandering toward 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.

¹⁸ See G. Marino: The Danish Doctor of Dread (“Opinionator”), *The New York Times*, 2012, March 17.

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. Instead the Socratic contribution elicits *from someone particular, from this 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 to decisively 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.¹⁹

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 can't complete the process he initiates, but we can make headway. He can offer possibilities, but he can't 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*, to resolve 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.²⁰

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

¹⁹ I can bring out sub-phases within this phase of self-examination. I no longer focus on what someone in my circumstance does to achieve an identity – say, what a judge-to-be might generally do to become a judge. I focus on what *I alone* must do to achieve this identity, here and now. That can't be *merely* a matter of rote imitation, doing 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 make the resolutions and actions that secure (however precariously) that existential identity, *my* reality. I don't just 'play the role of a judge' but become one myself. 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, 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 parson or judge that I must be? How, and with what style, and to what end?

²⁰ See R. Pippin: On 'Becoming Who One Is' (and Failing): Proust's Problematic Selves, in: N. Kompridis: *Philosophical Romanticism*, London: Routledge 2006, 113–140.

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 arts or politics, gender relations, religious intolerance, or 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 *existentially alter listeners and readers, one by one*. Each wants to make headway toward salvation of souls, or at least to remove vanities that obstruct making headway. Kierkegaard is the Socrates who “makes [those in his presence] ill at ease, and inflicts upon them the unpardonable offence of making them doubt themselves.”²¹ Kierkegaard writes late in life that his mission has always been Socratic. His pseudonymous authorship especially is an endlessly unsettling Socratic installation of self-doubt offered as a preliminary to self-transformation.

VII. Beyond cultural identity

Let me consider this indeterminacy of identity by reflecting on Henri Bergson in the last days of his life.²² 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, perhaps, not *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, especially in the late 1930s, 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 who were already facing a horror that would only grow. *He de-*

²¹ See M. Merleau-Ponty: *In Praise of Philosophy*, transl. J. Wild and J.M. Edie, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1988, 31–39. Kelly Dean Jolley develops Merleau-Ponty’s discussions of Bergson’s decision to stand forth as a Jew, and links it to the Socratic nature of philosophy. I discovered his discussion while wrestling with these questions. A draft of his lecture is available at <http://kellydeanjolley.com/2012/08/31/draft-of-mmp-talk/>.

²² M. Merleau-Ponty: *In Praise of Philosophy*, 36, quoted in Jolley’s lecture, p. 12.

terminated 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. For us, and for him, that *settles* which way to read his life. But the large Kierkegaard community has not yet resolved the field of possible interpretations of his works. We don't know how to *settle* the interpretative possibilities.

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*? Our 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'm 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, or simply a polemical anti-Hegelian.” 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.²³ Having an objective cultural slot for him – poet, theologian, culture critic, para-philosopher – would defeat his aim. By repeatedly slipping our nets, he hopes to make a *Socratic, existential contribution*.

²³ 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, 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.

VIII. Socratic stings effect change

If I am 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 slap dash, 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.²⁴ Which way I resolve this crux shapes the interpreter I will be.

If I become a generous interpreter I’m will be both generous and *grateful* for insights bequeathed. If I interpret suspiciously, as a master un-masker, 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 won’t 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 suppose 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 out. 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,

²⁴ See “Love, that lenient interpreter,” *On Søren Kierkegaard*, chap. 5.

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.

IX. 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.”²⁵

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, Kierkegaard’s 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, 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 (it both is and is not, “all about me”).

He conducts trials of existence, where his subjectivity meets mine around love and responsibility, urgency and 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 – a dance before such divine 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, 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.

²⁵ M. Merleau-Ponty: *In Praise*, 36, discussed, by Jolley, p. 12.