KIERKEGAARD

Written by one of the world's preeminent authorities on Kierkegaard, this biography is the first to reveal the delicate imbrication of Kierkegaard's life and thought. To grasp the importance and influence of Kierkegaard's thought far beyond his native Denmark, it is necessary to trace the many factors that led this gifted but (according to his headmaster) "exceedingly childish youth" to grapple with traditional philosophical problems and religious themes in a way that later generations would recognize as amounting to a philosophical revolution.

Although Kierkegaard's works are widely tapped and cited, they are seldom placed in context. Nor is due attention paid to their chronology. However, perhaps more than the work of any other contributor to the Western philosophical tradition, these writings are so closely meshed with the background and details of the author's life that knowledge of this is indispensable to their content.

Alastair Hannay solves these problems by following the chronological sequence of events and focusing on the formative stages of Kierkegaard's career, from the success of his first pseudonymous work, *Either/Or,* through to *The Sickness unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity.*

This book offers a powerful narrative account that will be of particular interest to philosophers, literary theorists, intellectual historians, and scholars of religious studies as well as to any nonspecialist looking for an authoritative guide to the life and work of one of the most original and fascinating figures in Western philosophy.

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Kierkegaard

A Biography

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Preface

ONE AIM of a biography of a famous intellectual figure is to place its subject's works in their historical and cultural context. Another, closer to home, is to see the works in the context of their author's own intellectual development. But we must bear in mind that it is the *bios* of the subject, and not of the works, that the biographer must focus on. Obviously enough, for it is just because the works themselves are still alive, and so don't qualify for biography, that we are interested in their author. Yet it is because they still live that we are curious about the life of their author.

What is the precise link between works and a life that allows biography to be at once both intellectual and biography? Must the biographer's interest in a writer and thinker be confined to those aspects of the life that as it were produce the works? Perhaps, but then of course the actual origins of a thinker's ideas go much further back than to the writer's schooldays or birth; they can be traced as far back as the early histories of the ideas which the works embody. And if the intellectual biographer's task is conceived more particularly, as in Kierkegaard's case, as that of finding out and describing how an intellectual tradition has come to be renewed or transformed by a great thinker, then although the contingencies of time, place, talent, and opportunity that are part of the thinker's biography will enter quite naturally into an account of the genesis of the works, this still doesn't explain why it should be necessary to write a full-blown biography.

Still, it is doubtful whether an academic curiosity about origins is the real reason for the genre. Behind or beside that we may find a simple fascination with history. But other motivations too can make us hanker after biography. Isn't there a more particular curiosity, when it comes down to it, that intellectual biography caters to, a desire to uncover the

secret of the person 'behind' the works? Divine spark? Lucky break? Noble mind? Feet of clay? Maybe even a personal fascination with creativity itself, an interest in calculating just how far from Olympus or Parnassus we ourselves are, or how close.

An intellectual biography is not then simply the biography of an intellectual. For reasons of the kind just hinted at it should, as biography, by rights be something less, but on the intellectual side perhaps something more. Calling a biography of a writer 'intellectual' signals the fact that what we have been bequeathed is an edifice of thought. Rather strangely, if the same grounds were given for categorizing a biography of, say, Beethoven or Wordsworth, we would be made to expect in their respective cases a 'musical' and a 'poetic' biography. Apparently, then, as a genre intellectual biography must be in some way sui generis with regard to the nature of its subject's special contribution.

We can say that the biography is intellectual not *just* because its subject was that too, but because through that very fact suitably attuned readers are helped by a suitably erudite biographer to grasp in recapitulation the genesis and substance of the subject's intellectual achievement. Erudition here requires entering somehow into the world of the subject's thought, something which requires in turn a mastery of the words and concepts from the tradition to which the subject has made a significant contribution. The very ability to write and to read such a biography might therefore be taken not only as some indication of the fact that the works do in fact continue to live but also as a measure of the success of the thinker's achievement. We owe it to him or to her that we have or still have the tools to rehearse and appreciate that life's achievement.

That there is still a question, however, of the relationship between an interest in the life and an interest in the works can be seen by asking what would be achieved in regard to the one by simply beginning and ending with the other. Suppose you take your point of departure in the writings. As far as a writer's works are concerned it is only so far as a once-living creator can be revealed in the still-living works that a rehearsal of the history of the works will yield its creator and provide material for that creator's *own* biography. But then facts of biography important enough in the subject's life may have very little bearing or none at all on what we find significant in that subject's works, particularly so, one would think, in the case of those whose contributions are

intellectual, unlike warriors, politicians, and statesmen. Not only may there be very few facts of note to relate in any case, writers' lives tending in general to be quite dull – and those of thinkers are hardly likely to be less so – those worth telling may take us no further than explaining how the thinker got started and what sustained him. Suppose, however, that we started and ended with the narrative of a creative writer's or thinker's life. We would risk never getting to the works at all. One need only think of the films and documentaries about famous authors that win audiences and prizes but without, beyond a few ritual quotations out of context, telling their audience anything about the contents of their works.

Some today will say, well and good, let's forget the biographical incident and get on with the works, adding that if you are looking for the life of the author there if anywhere is where you will find it, a life that we note can now even be thought of as still being lived. Followers of Barthes and Foucault would claim, conveniently enough, though in a rather backhanded way, for the credibility of the intellectual biography as a genre, that any biography of a writer *can only* begin and end with the text. A writer's real life, after all, his or her immortality, is in the text. From that point of view, all readings of Kierkegaard, and they are legion, are 'biographies'. Taken as it were from the top, there are as many biographies, as many lives, as there are readings. The many-lives paradox that this implies is one that many in our age will take in their stride. They will also point to the commonplace that for a writer so concerned about life, Kierkegaard's own life was a conspicuously uneventful one. So a biographer choosing not to read Kierkegaard's *bios* in his *grafe* is left having to reconstruct any *bios* from hearsay or correspondence about such insignificant remainders as the private person bent over his desk, getting tired, taking a stroll in a city park, looking at the scenery from a carriage, visiting coffee-houses, restaurants, the theatre, baiting his contemporaries, having fleeting thoughts, feelings, and so on.

There is good reason for saying that when looking for the life of the author, in Kierkegaard's case the writings are the place to look. This is sometimes obscured by superficial references to the pseudonymity of the works most likely to provide the source. The fashionable view has always been that the pseudonyms are covers behind which the real Kierkegaard, however large or small, coherent or incoherent a person-

ality himself, lurks. But pseudonymity can just as well be an effective means of exposure, the disguise of a disguise that allows an author to spill more of himself onto his pages than would be prudent or proper if the works were signed. A biographer may be encouraged by this thought to expect to find a good deal of *bios* in the *grafe*. Kierkegaard gives some support to this too, claiming once that he had become as much a product of his writings as they were of him. So if the art of disguise that Kierkegaard is said by so many to have perfected was in fact the art of the disguise of disguise, there would be a distinct possibility that what we find in the pseudonymous works is something very close to the man himself and his inner life.

There are, however, some difficulties with this. Kierkegaard was as much a writer as a thinker. In fact although the description of his mental or spiritual development as 'intellectual' is apt enough, it also had, as we know, its aesthetic (poetic) and religious sides. Not only that, it is unclear that the word 'intellectual' is really all that apt for what he intended even his most convincingly intellectual works both to represent and to convey, just as by the same token it is unclear that he wanted to be thought of as, in any conventional sense, a philosopher. His works, he insisted, were not attempts to put across or defend any set of propositions but were something much closer to poetry – though not exactly that either, because the poetry or literary form had a religious purpose and focus. In one respect you might think this spoke in favour of the view that his works disclose him, insofar as poetry is said to speak from the heart and not (just) the more or less disembodied head. However, this matter of poetic disclosure is not so straightforward, and we should bear in mind W. B. Yeats's observation that the self-images conveyed by the writings of a poet are as a rule the reverse of the truth, even of the truth as the poet sees it. And it does seem plausible to suppose that a main motivation behind the huge effort that writers put into their poetic products stems often from a sense of lacking in themselves the very substance that their works appear to convey.

Besides reasons of this kind for finding the biography in the text, whether that details of the actual life are inessential because trivial compared with the writer's true deed or that a writer's life is somehow taken over by the writings, there are also reasons of a more traditional sort that can be invoked for coming to the same conclusion. A life behind the texts will be just plainly elusive, not just for lack of evidence

but by the very nature of evidence itself and the appeal to it. These reasons apply quite generally to anything historical, and even more to the attitudes, beliefs, fears, hopes, and plans of someone long since dead. What could ever confirm or disconfirm hypotheses about what someone was actually thinking when plying pen to paper? And compared to the text in our hands, what would be the use of confirmation in such matters anyway? Does it even make sense to speak of facts of the matter of what the author had in mind? Once again it seems that it is to the text and to the possibilities of interpretation that we must look.

Given the complexities of human psychology and their power to make even autobiographical judgments suspect, there is surely some point to this. There may also be more than a grain of truth in what Barthes and Foucault say in favour of what we have, namely the texts. As for the biography offered here, it 'solves' these more traditional problems simply by riding resolutely, though some may say slipshod, over the disjunction that gives rise to them: either elusive biographical incident or available text. The justification for doing so is simply the commonsense intuition that there is no good reason to suppose that the way to Kierkegaard's life, to the man *of* and to whatever extent *in* the works, is exclusively through the works themselves. An artist's work, fleeting or subsistent, can be linked in many ways with his or her person and life. Not all artists produce themselves in their work, some stand fairly still, or apart, while others go through early, middle, and late periods, even periods of decline, as many claim was the case of Nietzsche, and was widely held regarding Kierkegaard by surviving contemporaries. In their periods of growth they develop their language, their palette, their powers of emotional expression, the range or depth of what it is they try to express. But even in the case of what they bring to expression, the range and depth do not always apply equally to the personality of the creator. In this respect Anton Bruckner's opus is not autobiographical in the way that Gustav Mahler's is. With Kierkegaard the autobiographical aspect is undeniably present in terms both of his own development as an artist and, in a way that seldom applies to composers, of the impact his works had on the environment of which he became a salient part. It is impossible to read Kierkegaard properly without knowing where he stood in relation to his time, its culture, even life in general, and as I anticipate the reader will come to agree, it would be ridiculous to suppose that the life can tell us nothing about how the

texts are to be understood. The story told here is one of a struggle, a competition, a combat even, a conflict which Kierkegaard waged with himself and his surroundings.

One main leitmotif of the story as told will be that as the conflict developed Kierkegaard came consciously to present his own life in the form of a drama. Its plot was set primarily in a small city, Copenhagen, and it was only very indirectly that he saw himself as a player in a greater drama unfolding on the European and world-historical stage. But that he saw the significance of his own local drama in terms of its opposition to what was unfolding there is certainly true. If life was his topic, it was primarily his own life that provided the source material, and that life then became a self-written and self-produced stage-piece in which his own writings were the lines, and in the writing of which his own role, as he wrote it, became ever more clearly drawn. That the writings were later to occupy the centre of a European cultural stage with actors playing parts not all of which he himself may have envisaged is another matter. But a work like the present one, by going back to the process of production, can help, among other things, to point out the extent to which, to make them amenable to commentators and stage directors of a later generation, the lines have had to be reworked and their link with the processes of their production to a degree severed.

By publishing his writings, and despite the pseudonyms, Kierkegaard deliberately and in the end provocatively exposed himself to the reactions of his contemporaries, many of whom firmly believed they did indeed see him in his texts. It is as if, somewhere along the way, seeing the inevitability of the dénouement of his own story, Kierkegaard tried to take control of the endgame and assist in the inevitable. The plot, due partly to the sense of drama that went into its making, is not hard to reconstruct. Thanks to the acuity of this very alert and self-aware actor on the local stage, the unities are there for the biographer to see and to reproduce.

Since the biography here is an intellectual one and for reasons discussed its topics do not easily coincide with the biological chronology of the protagonist, I have not felt bound to follow a strictly chronological order. The actual story begins at a moment in the latter's *bios* when the ideas that came to invest his works first made their entry on the public scene. The intellectual story, although already begun, first gets properly going in a youthful speech which seemed carefully crafted to

put Kierkegaard in good odour with people whose approval at the time meant much to him. The occasion allows us to sketch in en passant the political and cultural background of the city and of the country in which Kierkegaard was born. The details of the family and *its* life, and of the education that had brought him to the point of making this, his first and only, public speech are presented in the second chapter. Kierkegaard's story ended only twenty years later when, self-cast in the role of martyr, and having it seems deliberately worked himself into a cultural corner from which the only way out was up, and perfectly on cue, he fell ill and died.

There are many interesting perspectives on this. One such sees in it an outcome Kierkegaard would have wanted to avoid, the consequence of his disastrous decision to put to public use a self-image created in the poetic privacy of the pseudonyms. So what we have is another drama, the tragedy of a person who tries fatefully to write himself into a drama and then substitutes it for reality. The drama's plot goes something like this: when at last Kierkegaard strode actively out of his texts and onto the real stage, or when, as some might say, the privately nursed narrative hit the world-historical fan, Kierkegaard lost the power to 'dictate' the continuation, the pages flew apart, and the end was a fiasco. From another perspective, however, it was all carefully considered if not from the start at least well before the end, and the end itself was one that Kierkegaard consistently welcomed. Readers of the following narrative are invited to test these views and any others for themselves. They may also want to test Kierkegaard's own claims, especially the one quite early in his journal that after his death no one would find a single word about what 'filled his life', the 'script' or 'cipher' perhaps, in 'my inmost being that explains everything and which for me often makes into matters of huge moment what people would call trifles, and which I consider of no importance once I remove the secret note that explains it'.[1] Do the subsequent entries, does the later course of the life, does even the aftermath itself betray the secret, if indeed there was one? The author's hope is, in the spirit of one of his subject's pseudonyms, to have provided at least enough biographical and expository material to make the task of arriving at final judgments in all such matters not so much easier as more difficult, and therefore more rewarding.

Although Kierkegaard's own story ended with his death, the story *of* Kierkegaard, naturally enough, still continues. Since our own story

must end somewhere it concludes with a short account of the impact, first, of his life and death upon his contemporaries and immediate successors and, second, of his writings when they began to become available in German and then in French translation during the early part of the twentieth century. At the very end I offer some concluding reflections on the reception more generally.

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