Introduction

In his otherwise disparaging essay on Kierkegaard's poetics, George Lukács notes: "he saw more clearly than any other the thousand aspects, the thousand-fold variability of every motive [and] how, if we look really close, we can see an unbridgeable abyss gaping between two barely perceptible nuances."[1] This comment well characterizes one of Kierkegaard's most compelling rhetorical strategies. The reader who enters a text supposing himself to have a respectable grasp on reality and its principles finds himself dizzied by the numerous, previously imperceptible, possibilities for error. In *Works of Love* Kierkegaard brings this tactic to bear on our intimate engagements, pressing the reader to inspect the vast "variability of every motive" and to discover the "unbridgeable abyss gaping" between what we think to be love and what love truly is. If appropriately taken by the text, we peer inward at the multiple, often dubious motives propelling our own engagements, confess with dismay the irreparable fracture running through our love, and seek redemption.

Kierkegaard's aim and his form are offensive, his rather unlovely tone unremitting. As Karl Barth protests regarding *Works of Love*, merely human love is "tracked down to its last hiding-place, examined, shown to be worthless and haled before the judge!"[2] This complaint, by a theologian indebted to Kierkegaard, has been magnified and repeated, in various ways, by subsequent interpreters. The response is understandable. Employing what Barth calls his "detective skill," Kierkegaard shines harsh light on the distinction between *eros* and *agape*, and we are left, quite uncharitably, exposed. Barth's own argument with Kierkegaard on this matter is complicated, but it hinges in part on the concern that *Works of Love* over-accentuates conflict between the erotic and the Christian. Kierkegaard misses that the two loves "do not finally confront each other in equal dignity and power," and that "in *agape*, we have to do with a superior and triumphant human action." By Barth's interpretation, our

author is preoccupied with error, overestimating our predicament and miscalculating God's power.

When faced with this critique, some of Kierkegaard's apologists have uncovered in *Works of Love* his positive depiction of *eros* redeemed, of desire taken up through God's grace, into the "unity of love" that "overcom[es] the dichotomy" between "sensuous and spiritual love."[3] In this book, I disagree with such an apology, and not merely for the sake of academic argument. Reading Kierkegaard's book of love alongside his intricate tales of love gone awry, we find that, to employ and counter Barth's words, Christian love is neither a "superior" nor a "triumphant human action." Rather, faithful love teeters right on the edge of our infinite culpability and God's radical grace. And what is more, we learn that, for those who live after the fall and before the return, our access to such love is precarious, dependent precisely on what Barth deems preoccupation with error.[4] For Kierkegaard, it is our continued detection and prayerful confession of self-delusion, acquisition, and usurpation that repeatedly returns us to the only context wherein love can draw breath, a relation of infinite debt.

Works of Love is not a book regarding love in general. It is aimed at the reader in particular. As his preface makes clear, Kierkegaard intends for each "single individual" to read the text as it applies, ineluctably, to his own existence (WL, 3). Although Kierkegaard consistently returns to this point, we are tempted, in various ways, to prevent such exposure. Reading the text alongside his narrative works – where narrators and characters attempt, and fail, to love – prevents one such evasion. In the pseudonymous texts, Kierkegaard gives life, voice, and volition to the sketches of blunder and vice in *Works of Love*. For example, our temptation to despair of love's possibility becomes, in *Fear and Trembling*, a knight who gives up the princess; the desire to consume, a duplicitous merman. In *Repetition*, Kierkegaard molds a young troubadour from poetic enthusiasm and forges a voyeuristic detective from cynical acquisition. Through the voice and person of Judge William, in *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way*, Kierkegaard plays out the soporific implications of our false confidence in marriage. And, through the entries of the secretive Diarist (also in *Stages*) Kierkegaard breathes anguished life into our fear of disclosure. His characters are not simply allegorical examples or one-dimensional manifestations of mistaken love. Rather they are like us, complicated and decidedly incomplete. The "lesson," and there is one, is intertwined with our perplexity over the impending conclusion to their and our story. Kierkegaard entices the reader to care about and puzzle over them – and over ourselves. The texts provoke us to realize that

our task occurs in the cacophonous intersection of unceasing temporal movement, epistemological bafflement, and vice.

What Kierkegaard intimates in these pseudonymous texts, indirectly and variously, is that the reader must repent. Each story involves a different false start along a wrong route, and the reader must seek instead a relationship with that one who occasions our repentance and our redemption. The common factor uniting all of the irreligious texts is the void that brings them into being. Running underneath and between the disorder of the characters' lives is an absence, the correction for which Kierkegaard commends in *Works of Love*:

> When we speak this way, we are speaking of the love that sustains all existence, of God's love. If for one moment, one single moment, it were to be absent, everything would be confused. (WL, 301)

Perceiving with Kierkegaard's characters that our hope cannot lie with our righteous, resolute will, with our incremental tallying of guilt and innocence, or with a coincidence of desire and tangibility, the reader is opened to Kierkegaard's summons in *Works of Love*. We are pushed toward the very source of love that truly "sustains all existence."

The pseudonymous works also disconcertingly suggest that this sustenance to which *Works of Love* points is a far cry from what we normally estimate as security. It is not as if the perceptive reader progresses, leap by leap, from pseudonymous to religious text, from secular to spiritual stage, toward a fixedly joyful expression of Christian love. Those who take up Kierkegaard's call to redemption do not become "yodeling saints," to use one character's phrase (SLW, 259). Although Constantin Constantius, the narrator of *Repetition*, surmises from the outside that faith grants the individual an "iron consistency and imperturbability," the love Kierkegaard elucidates in *Works of Love* is perilous (R, 229). Even we who seek the relation offered in Christ find ourselves decidedly inconsistent and perturbed. Kierkegaard's ability to direct our attention toward "the unbridgeable abyss gaping between two barely perceptible nuances" (to return to Lukács) continually troubles us as we seek to love well. What we think to be apt adoration may be predation; supposedly respectful distance may be a manifestation of fear, or even repulsion; we may think we hear God's call to withdraw from engagement, but the voice may instead be our own self-protective desire to retreat. And, even when we are fairly clear about the task at hand, we rarely, if ever, meet it.

This is not a snag in Kierkegaard's system but a deliberate unsettling which reveals the very impossibility of a Christian system of morality. If there is a "key" to the Christian life (even phrasing it this way weakens

Kierkegaard's rhetorical aim), it is that we recognize our drastic need for forgiveness. The Taciturn Friar from *Stages on Life's Way* puts this point sharply: "from the religious point of view, the greatest danger is that one does not discover, that one is not always discovering, that one is in danger" (SLW, 469). We learn, by reading these texts together, that the virtue most closely aligned to love, for Kierkegaard, is humility: a sense of our original, potential, and actual transgression and of our indebtedness to God. It is through such humility that we are able to approximate Christ's command to love the neighbor with whom we live daily. Knowing the treachery of our intimacy and our infinite need for grace, we are better able to distinguish self from other, to forgive the beloved whose faults most tempt us to despair, and to perceive generously the one whose transgressions we have most frequent occasion to note.

In order to note the "danger" to which the Taciturn Friar alludes, we must become aware of our immediate predicament. We resist the work Kierkegaard intends unless the text hits home, literally. Reading the pseudonymous texts with *Works of Love* proscribes the evasive maneuver of philosophical generalization at the expense of specificity. By presenting the question of existence precisely where boy meets girl (and where boy seduces girl, marries girl, or escapes from girl), Kierkegaard poses the question as the reader's and the interpreter's own. In all of the texts we will consider, Kierkegaard labors to bring us back to our own life and love. The "problem" is thus not merely one of "alterity"; the problem is also the other, before you, and what you wish to do to or with her. Although theory is necessary, given that we are faced with the problem of all the possible others, we must also face up to the problem of that single individual with whom we are to sup. We cannot know the "unbridgeable abyss" resulting from this problem unless we resist the temptation to flee from the question. Interpreting Kierkegaard's book on love with "the girl" always in view is, therefore, not only morally but religiously crucial. Unless the reader faces the quandary that is her existence in relation to his own, he may miss his own call to confession and redemption.

One example may serve to suggest this point, which will become clearer as we proceed. The "concept" of "repetition" in *Repetition* cannot do the work Kierkegaard intends if we wrest it free from the text and send it soaring into the atmosphere. To do so allows us to avoid Kierkegaard's narrative poetics, in which the term is inextricably imbedded. The strange tale itself matters for our accurate understanding of any particular "category" therein. Our author places Constantin Constantius's musings on repetition at the opening of a detailed story, in which two men collude to acquire renewal from the other while remaining at a

self-protective distance. In a lovely way, *Repetition*, as a text, prohibits its use as an escape from immediacy, that is, your immediacy, and mine. As we shall see, the thief and the poet who seek to define "repetition" do so while attempting to control, and then avoid, the real other who occasions the problem. Kierkegaard knew this elusive move well, and, in his authorship, he refuses himself and his readers such comfort. Using the poet's own means against himself, Kierkegaard renders the romantic attempt to fly from actuality as a form of cowardice. Just as *Repetition*'s narrator is *denied* repetition while sitting safely alone in the theater, voyeuristically observing others enact, scholars who carefully extract and re-narrate the concept deny themselves the point.

As Kierkegaard wages battle against German Romanticism, one of the issues clearly at stake is this loss of a real reader. As our generation attempts to understand, and use, his terms, we must not forget that his texts represent a painstaking attempt to awaken those who interpret, but do not live. Kierkegaard endeavors, over and over again, to create and engage a reader who will not flee, who will not break away from that which is read. Constantin and the young poet live a lie in part because they are unwilling to enter their own play and face the returned gaze of a real other, whose claim implicates them. If we watch the text perform, without finding ourselves entangled in it, we thwart Kierkegaard's aim and implicate ourselves in his accusation. The warning of *Repetition* exists in each of the other texts we will treat. Each pseudonymous work powerfully tethers text to existence, and *Works of Love* definitely fastens command to life; to read the texts together strengthens his aim. The result intended may be more than the reader can bear, but we are, like their author, not allowed escape. In an attempt to be true to this, Kierkegaard's homiletic intent, I will throughout this book remain close to the twists and turns of each text, pulling back from his prose and his poetry only in order to haul each one of us back in.

At the risk of weakening that effort, I should note here in the introduction that Kierkegaard's provocative work on love answers other philosophical endeavors of his and our time. His effort is historically apt, but not merely so. The echoes of the voices he countered reverberate still, and it is thus worth noting his continual reply. First, by converting duty into an inaccessible law of love, Kierkegaard takes our supposedly resolute will, inspects it for discrepancy, and determines us to be irreparably torn from the ought we should both perceive and enact. Second, by narrating the poetic dream of love as it runs aground in actuality, Kierkegaard displays the dissipation of supposedly liberated play. Finally, by thwarting

a Christian return to clarity, coherence, and confidence, he attempts to shut down the system. We will briefly take these answers in turn. Although this is just one possible, and merely suggestive, way to describe his influence, it is a plausible one.[5]

Several of the texts we consider undermine, in obvious and more subtle ways, Immanuel Kant's description of duty met. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard gives theological reasons for his resistance. By leading the reader repeatedly back to the command to love the neighbor close at hand, Kierkegaard compels us to confess that Kant's confidence is beyond us. The text is to have a dizzying effect on us, as we twirl around and around a law that is infinitely faceted yet immediately required. Kierkegaard redefines the discrepancy between who we presently are and who we are called to become as a problem of knowledge and of will, for we discover ourselves to be both inadvertently and willfully confused. In the fruitful disorientation resulting from *Works of Love*, we further note that, on the rare occasion when we do perceive the command clearly, we find ourselves unwilling to submit. What emerges is our realization that duty, so construed, is met only in the form of a radical other. In this, Kierkegaard's alternative context, our freedom is not derived from our own meeting of duty. We do not participate in the realm of liberty to the extent that we choose well. Rather, we are freed to the extent that we remain in perpetual relation to the one who truly fulfills such a law, the same one by whose work we become beholden to God. A mere postulate of the divine is therefore insufficient.

Kierkegaard's answer to Kantian duty becomes acute in his treatment of Judge William, in both *Either/Or* and in *Stages on Life's Way*. As we discover that William's wife is the postulate that holds together the beautiful, the desired, and the required, we begin to worry that Kant's rendition of the moral life is inadequately troubled. Reading the three texts together (WL, E/O, and SLW), we may detect Kierkegaard's warning to philosophy: if William's wife can plausibly "fill in" for God, as the lovely *deus ex machina* in this treatise on morality, then William's ethical question is inadequately complex. By reading William's treatises with *Works of Love*, we may note the way that Kierkegaard uses Kant's own prohibition of mere use to thwart the reliability of duty itself. Although it is crucial to note that William is Kierkegaard's own literary construction (and as such is an overly convenient foil), the misunderstanding to which Kierkegaard alludes in these texts is not. William presents a culturally malleable Kantianism that haunts his and our time. By gravely underestimating God's command, we not only use others with ignorance and impunity; we also eschew the requisite crisis and avoid an encounter with God.

If staid marriage does not resolve the predicament of existence, neither does poetic license. Kierkegaard forecloses this philosophical turn as he depicts the illusion of poetic idealism. In *Works of Love*, he exposes as frivolous the attempt to decorate the fissures remaining in Kant's work with perpetual, freed enjoyment. George Pattison persuasively argues that Kierkegaard seeks, in the Seducer's Diary of *Either/Or*, to defy the answer Friedrich Schlegel gives in his own life and in his Romantic text, *Lucinde*.[6] It is not merely his sense of decorum that leads Kierkegaard to insist that an adulterous affair with the daughter of one's friend is not the answer to the question torn open by the epistemological crises of his time. He contends that such an answer is self-delusive, the enjoyment merely temporary. As Pattison explains, in *Lucinde* Schlegel attempts to point a new way to "the primal garden," a way paved "simply [with] the freedom of sensuous innocence and delight," and Kierkegaard answers by naming the entire effort a ruse.[7] Kierkegaard's most extreme example of this problem is the young poet of *Repetition*, through whom Kierkegaard narrates the incapacity of such Romanticism to follow through. But in each of the pseudonymous texts we treat, we may perceive this problem with the supposed freedom of artistic endeavor: it cannot endure the test of time, on the lover or the beloved. Merely human creativity is incapable of sustaining an encounter with an actual other.

In answering poetic enervation, Kierkegaard does not lead us back, resolvedly, to William's resilient marriage.[8] We are left in the midst of the crises, finally incommensurate with both Kantian duty and Romantic play and incapable of either a truly "good" marriage or a truly satisfying tryst. Regardless of our choice, the margins remain unjustified, as do we. In the midst of actuality, we find ourselves perpetually indecipherable. The character "A" in *Either/Or* Part 1 gestures toward the matter by complaining:

> When I consider its various epochs, my life is like the word *Schnur* in the dictionary, which first of all means a string, and second a daughter-in-law. All that is lacking is that in the third place the word *Schnur* means a camel, in the fourth a wisk broom. (E/O, 1:36)

In the texts we will consider, Kierkegaard suggests that the way into truth requires such an acknowledgment. To use Schlegel again as an example, he was right to recognize that a settled existence in bourgeois Germany was not the beautiful solution to life's illegible problem. But, Kierkegaard contends, he was wrong to think that his art (and play) could create a viable alternative. The self remains undefined, but not for the sake of the freedom Schlegel supposed. An individual is left with an

infinite multiplicity of possibilities, all of them incapable of summing up his existence. What is required is a particular relation, a relation much less comfortable than William's duty and considerably less enjoyable than *Lucinde*.

For Kierkegaard, this vulnerable exposure must perdure. Winding through all of the texts we read here is Kierkegaard's intricate summons to bare vulnerability. And in this summons lies Kierkegaard's third relevant answer to philosophy. Hegel's systematic method sublates the very fractures into which we must fall if we are to be saved. Both the task of veritable love and the only route into that love require a humble receptivity that Hegel undermines, as do his presently confident, Christian, interlocutors. Only by resisting the temptation to cloak ourselves in the collective confidence of Christendom do we find ourselves exposed, and thus capable of reception. Kierkegaard's fractured, irreligious, pseudonymous books are thus indispensable, for with them he pulls us into the "strange language" of indebtedness described in *Works of Love*. Such is the only language that approximates loving speech. Christians cannot leave the confused, pseudonymous works behind as we attempt *Works of Love*, because we learn the tongue of the latter text only inasmuch as we know ourselves dumb, defined by a relation of perpetual need and radical debt.[9] This does not mean that Kierkegaard is unconcerned with truth, but that coherence becomes, through his texts, paradoxically defined by rupture. Many of the irreligious characters in the pseudonymous texts stumble into an accidental realization of their own absurdity, but Kierkegaard's Christian answer is not a hearty return to a crowded table.

These aspects of relationality and vulnerability increasingly emerge as "the girl" reads the text. In deference to full disclosure, I must now break the frame, so to speak, and acknowledge an alliance of sorts. My interpretation of Kierkegaard's work is informed and emboldened by the reading of other women who have found in the texts what Kierkegaard continually endeavored to convey: that is, the girl exists. Feminism is a conversation to which Kierkegaard was not privy but with which I am involved, and I will note this debt explicitly in various places throughout the chapters. But, to put the point more generally, female readers increasingly correct a tendency that Pia Søltoft, in her own text, perfectly phrases thus:

> Everything in the authorship purportedly consists in choosing, winning, finding, becoming or taking control of oneself. This book calls into question this monomaniacal, monological interpretation of Kierkegaard.[10]

Søltoft herself reads Kierkegaard as describing and evoking a "svimmelhedens etik," an "ethic of dizziness" that is necessarily off-kilter from the supposedly victorious, individual, self.[11] I also deem it not incidental that the American scholar most presently engaged with *Works of Love* is also in league with "the girl." M. Jamie Ferreira's book-length treatment of the text arrived as I was completing the final editing of my own, so it will be up to subsequent interpreters to negotiate our disagreements.[12] While Ferreira and I both find in Kierkegaard's work a call to relationality, she and Sylvia Walsh both concentrate on the hopeful possibilities therein. This book contrasts rather sharply, as I strive to preserve Kierkegaard's narration of the obscurity and danger inherent to proximity. The difference is one of emphasis, although our emphases strongly diverge.

Feminism can, of course, become a sorority no more truthful than the "fraternity" of "*In Vino Veritas*" (to which we turn in Chapter 5). The epistemological privilege afforded due to our "otherness" goes only so far in interpreting Kierkegaard's textual aims. Here some feminists will believe that I betray the alliance by suggesting that Christ is the only answer to the conundrums posed by Kierkegaard's characters. Kierkegaard blocks women from the same options denied the men of these wayward tales. Even a life of wily seduction is increasingly accessible to women who would choose it, and we are ever more capable of living on William's side of his asymmetrical marriage. We cannot define ourselves, find our way out of confusion, or begin to love unless wed to the one who occasions our judgment and our salvation. While to do so may mitigate the universality of his indictment and call, I often employ singular male pronouns when referring to the reader or lover. I do this on the assumption that most men are less likely than most women to include themselves in a statement with a pronoun of the opposite gender, particularly when that statement is a call to humility. I will most often use first person plural pronouns, given that we are all at issue. By my reading, we must each comprehend not only abstractly but also with ardent hope that our worth is, as Gene Outka words it, "God-derived" and "conferred" through Christ.[13]

As we become involved in the misguided lives of Kierkegaard's characters and are pulled into his allegations against human love, we are to surmise that the possibility for true love depends on a factor beyond our own present capacities. This message runs as a refrain through each of Kierkegaard's books, and to this message we will repeatedly return. We begin in the first chapter by placing *Works of Love* within the critique in Kierkegaard's journals of Christian assumptions regarding the baptism of an entire culture in general and of marriage in particular. By reading

through the rhetorical structure of the text, we may interpret *Works of Love* as Kierkegaard's attempt to retrieve the *theological* (or convicting) use of the law, which his contemporaries overlooked in favor of bolstering assurance. *Fear and Trembling* may be read as his more poetic effort to the same end, and in the second chapter I intertwine it with *Works of Love* in order to make this common aim more obvious. Through de Silentio's complex and perplexing text, the reader is opened to the possibilities of self-delusion and error, and, already here in this early pseudonymous text, Kierkegaard hints that new life involves our humble receptivity to God's grace. In *Repetition*, the text for the third chapter, Kierkegaard gives voice to the scrupulous "third party" against which he warns in *Works of Love*. Through this "fruitless" text, the reader is to be provoked to consult a "confidant" other than the cynical Constantin. By this point, the reader will be tempted to rest in Judge William's stalwart account of Christian marriage, but, in the fourth chapter, I argue that Kierkegaard means in *Either/Or* to preclude this as an alternative to the earnest repentance that eludes the previous characters – a repentance that is a key to faithful engagement in *Works of Love*. With *Stages on Life's Way* we have an opportunity to sit once more with several of the previous characters, to experience again Constantin's malevolence and the subtle threat William poses to Christian love. If Judge William's is not the way, then we may find ourselves, like the Diarist, despairing altogether of human engagement. In this, the fifth chapter, we contrast the Diarist's "high-flying" escape with the "humble and difficult flight along the ground" to which we are called (WL, 161, 84). It is in the final chapter that we look back upon each of the wrong routes tried and proven futile and describe for a final time Kierkegaard's effort to push us toward Christ.

It is up to my own dear reader to discern whether Kierkegaard's depiction of love was his own evasion – whether, due to fear of intimacy, he increased the requirement beyond his own and our possible reach. The evidence of his failed attempt to love not only seeps in around the edges, but overtly structures the questions he continually asks. Each reader must discern whether he may move beyond Kierkegaard's quandaries, into a realm to which their author had not access. For those who are currently assured, his texts and my book will fail to satisfy. But for those of us who continually find ourselves incapable of securely grasping belief, much less, as de Silentio puts it, "going further than faith," we now return, and return, to the task and to the text.