INTRODUCTION: STAGES ON LOVE'S WAY

1 Kierkegaard, love, and *romantic* love

> And yet it must be wonderful to get the princess, and the knight of faith is the only happy man … to live happily with her day after day … this is wonderful. (FT, 50)

> … erotic love is undeniably life's most beautiful happiness. (WL, 267)

Romantic love, in contrast with neighbourly love or love for God, is rarely viewed as an important issue for Kierkegaard.[1] Despite the textual evidence regarding the centrality of *this kind* of love in his works, scholars in this field often seem reluctant to take the matter seriously. When required to address Kierkegaard's repeated references to love stories, the secondary literature tends either to interpret this as a literary device or, more frequently, to relate this to his unhappy personal relationship with Regine Olsen, his forsaken fiancée.[2] This 'biographical' approach is common among interpreters of Kierkegaard who believe that a complete understanding of his

[1] I use the expression 'romantic love' in its loose familiar sense of a love between two individuals that involves erotic aspects, without intending to connote any more specific notion such as the conception of love associated with the romantic tradition in literature.

[2] Søren Kierkegaard and Regine Olsen became engaged in 1840. Søren met Regine, a young and beautiful woman from an affluent family, years before the engagement, but proposed to her only in 1840, when she was 18 years old. A year later he broke off the engagement, without giving a convincing explanation. The broken engagement caused a great scandal in Copenhagen and much pain to everyone involved.

work requires a thorough understanding of his life, and vice versa. Such an interpretative method was dominant among earlier scholars (P. A. Heiberg and Walter Lowrie, for example), but it still has its ardent followers today (as demonstrated by Gene Fendt's book on *Works of Love* and especially by the comprehensive biography of Kierkegaard by Joakim Garff).[3] However, intriguing as this approach to interpreting Kierkegaard may be, it is evident that it does not take his preoccupation with romantic love to be *philosophically* enlightening. And this is true also with regard to scholars who do not entertain the 'biographical' approach: they are equally inclined to overlook the possibility of discovering philosophical insight in Kierkegaard's discussions of romantic love. There appear to be two main reasons for this.

The first reason concerns the context in which these discussions are usually found. The aesthetic writings which most conspicuously elaborate on this subject are written under pseudonyms and conveyed in the form of 'indirect communication'.[4] There is a vast discussion in the secondary literature regarding Kierkegaard's use of such indirectness, and the reasons offered for his decision to adopt this method are not uncontroversial. However, most of the commentators agree that the relationship between Kierkegaard's own views and those that he attributes to his pseudonyms is, at the very least, complicated. This complication not only challenges any attempt to give a coherent interpretation of his philosophy, but often leads to a sceptical assessment of the views expressed in the voices of his pseudonyms.[5] The centrality of romantic love in the lives of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms is thus disregarded because it is taken to represent *their* incomplete, or even mistaken, understanding of existence – Kierkegaard's apparent obsession with romantic love is understood not as a reflection of the importance of the matter to *him*, but rather as a reflection of the interests of his unhappy pseudonyms, and their problematic points of view.

The second major reason for not taking Kierkegaard's discussions of romantic love seriously has to do with his reputation as a philosopher who is interested exclusively in 'the single individual'.[6] Kierkegaard is seen as an anti-social philosopher, who has nothing to contribute to a moral understanding of the relationships between human beings. He is notoriously portrayed as a philosopher who focuses his attention on the individual's relationship with himself and with divinity, and is thus allegedly

[3] See Fendt 1989; Garff 2005.
[4] The designation of a group of Kierkegaard's writings as 'aesthetic' is explained in note 16 below.
[5] I refer to this complication in chapters 2 and 5.
[6] For Kierkegaard's use of this expression see, for example, PV, 101–26.

indifferent (or even hostile) to social, inter-human relationships. The life of faith offered by Kierkegaard, it is often claimed, is very lonely, leaving no room for relationships with human others, including of course relationships of romantic love. Martin Buber, in works such as *The Question to the Single One* and *What is Man?*, has probably contributed the most to shaping Kierkegaard's problematic image as estranged from morally significant relationships, but others have followed.[7] With a reputation like this, then, it is perhaps not surprising that one is hard pressed to find philosophers and scholars who seek in Kierkegaard's words enlightenment with regard to romantic love. Moreover, Kierkegaard himself has directly contributed to this problematic reputation, by formulating quite explicit claims against romantic love in his important book *Works of Love*.

On the face of it, *Works of Love* should have presented a challenge both to those who disregard Kierkegaard's views on love due to the indirectness of his writing and, in particular, to those who disregard them due to his reputation as an anti-social philosopher alienated from morality. First of all, *Works of Love* is a *direct* work, published under Kierkegaard's name. Secondly, it is devoted entirely to exploring the relationships of love that one ought to have with one's neighbours in general, and with particular neighbours more specifically (including, of course, our romantic beloveds). It seems, then, that this book provides a source for both a moral theory and a theory of romantic love, and thus should constitute at least the beginning of a reply to all those who refuse to see in Kierkegaard a philosopher who is interested in the subject of romantic love. However, this does not turn out to be the case: it is precisely Kierkegaard's extensive treatment of human relationships in this book which has drawn some of the severest criticism of his understanding of ethics and love.

In a harsh essay entitled 'On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love' Theodor Adorno claims that Kierkegaardian love is so abstract that it ultimately amounts to 'misanthropy', 'paradoxical callousness', and even a 'demonic hatred'; Knud Ejler Løgstrup, in the 'polemical epilogue' to his influential book, *The Ethical Demand*, wishes to '[settle] accounts with Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*'; and Irving Singer, in his wide-ranging study of love, declares that the doctrine of love presented in *Works of Love* is 'too remote from human experience to be convincing'.[8] These views of *Works of Love*, needless to say, have only strengthened the image of Kierkegaard as a philosopher

[7] See Buber 2004. For some more recent examples see MacIntyre 1984: 39–56, and also Mackey 1986.

[8] Adorno 1940: 423; Løgstrup 1997: 218; Singer 1987: 48.

who cannot contribute anything positive or valuable to the understanding of love in general, and to that of romantic love in particular.

In recent years, however, a new interest in *Works of Love* has emerged. Leading scholars of Kierkegaard such as George Pattison and C. Stephen Evans have published studies in which *Works of Love* plays a central role, and varied essays on this work have been gathered into an interesting collection.[9] An especially noteworthy contribution in this context is M. Jamie Ferreira's *Love's Grateful Striving* which constitutes the most comprehensive commentary on *Works of Love* to be published thus far.[10] These new readings of *Works of Love* have tried to establish its importance as an ethical work, and to correct earlier critical views of its philosophical position.

Nevertheless, even these sympathetic studies seem to neglect the special place of *romantic* love in the context of Kierkegaard's more general understanding of love. This is admittedly in accordance with the ambivalent spirit of *Works of Love*, as far as romantic love is concerned. After all, in this book, Kierkegaard draws a sharp distinction between neighbourly love and preferential love, and goes out of his way to demonstrate that the latter should be purified and transfigured by the former. Romantic love is a form of preferential love and, as such, is unequivocally denounced. At the same time, *Works of Love* praises love in all its possible forms, including the romantic. This inconsistent account of romantic love seems to have had the tendency to lead interpreters to assume that for Kierkegaard romantic love is a relatively marginal special case of *neighbourly* love. It is not surprising then that studies of *Works of Love* have usually been concerned with the meaning of love as directed at one's neighbour, any neighbour, rather than more specifically at one's romantic beloved. Indeed, the only recent study which focuses on Kierkegaard's understanding of *romantic* love, completely disregards the distinction between neighbourly love and preferential love.[11] However, to consider romantic love merely as a manifestation of neighbourly love is to diminish the importance of the former and to neglect its distinctive and unique nature.[12]

The interpretations of *Works of Love*, therefore, appear to leave us with the need to choose between two options. If we take the distinction

[9] See Evans 2004; Pattison 2002a; Perkins 1999. See also Andic 1998 and Walsh 1988, 1994.
[10] See Ferreira 2001. A detailed discussion of this book is presented in chapter 4.
[11] See Hall 2002. As its title suggests, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love* offers a pessimistic account of romantic love, which derives from Hall's view of our failure to follow Christ's example of *neighbourly* love. I discuss Hall's book in chapter 4.
[12] Such conflation is especially problematic with respect to the issue of preferentiality. I discuss this problem at length in chapters 4 and 5.

between neighbourly love and romantic love seriously, then we have to follow the critical interpretations of this book and end up with a strange conception of romantic love which is negative at worst and, at best, simply inconsistent. But if we follow the more recent readings of *Works of Love* and ultimately disregard this distinction (or render it inessential), then it seems that we will have to conclude that Kierkegaard has nothing special to say about romantic love *in particular*.

We seem to be faced, therefore, with two unhappy options as far as the relevance of *Works of Love* to a theory of romantic love is concerned. Either, as the critics argue, the book fails to provide any convincing account of love, romantic or otherwise or, as the sympathizers imply, it provides a valuable account of love, but ultimately one that blurs the unique character of *romantic* love, failing to distinguish it from other forms of love.

Should this, then, be our conclusion regarding Kierkegaard's view of romantic love? Does he indeed have nothing illuminating to contribute to our understanding of this *specific form* of love? In the present study I wish to argue quite to the contrary. I claim not only that the subject of romantic love is important for Kierkegaard, but that he offers a unique understanding of its nature and significance. To see this, however, we must broaden our investigation and, in contrast with the customary interpretative tendency in this connection, focus not only on *Works of Love* but also on the aesthetic writings, and, in particular, on *Fear and Trembling*. In this central text Kierkegaard presents, side by side with stories of romantic love, an account of the double structure of faith, which includes two seemingly contradicting movements: the movement of resignation and the movement of faith. There is an important connection, I claim, between these two movements and a possible understanding, and fulfilment, of love. Not only does the account of the double movement of faith in *Fear and Trembling* interestingly parallel the stories of love that it relates, this account also helps to address the inconsistent view of romantic love that we find in *Works of Love*. Exploring love in the light of faith, then, opens a new way to the understanding of love, and *romantic* love in particular.

It is widely agreed that at the core of Kierkegaard's philosophy is a concern with the life of faith. In the present study, however, I wish to point to the intriguing connection that Kierkegaard draws between faith and love, and more specifically between faith and *romantic* love; this profound connection, I argue, may serve to illuminate the nature of the latter. This study therefore attempts to develop a Kierkegaardian account of love on the basis of a detailed examination of Kierkegaard's account of faith, and

in the context of this exploration to offer a theory of romantic love. As we shall see, the central themes of resignation coupled with repetition, of self-denial coupled with affirmation, of the need to give away coupled with the ability to receive back, are crucial for understanding the life of love no less than for understanding the life of faith.

2 The joyful security of the insecure[13]

The struggle of love

> … love and life together first take something away from a person before they give. (WL, 154)

Years before writing these words in *Works of Love*, the young Kierkegaard articulated the following reflections in his journal:

> Often, as I stood here on a quiet evening, the sea intoning its song with deep but calm solemnity … then the few dear departed ones rose from the grave before me, or rather, it seemed as though they were not dead. I felt so much at ease in their midst, I rested in their embrace, and I felt as though I were outside my body and floated about with them in a higher ether – until the seagull's harsh screech reminded me that I stood alone and it all vanished before my eyes … I have often stood there and pondered my past life and the different surroundings that have exerted power over me. And before my contemplative gaze, vanished the pettiness that so often causes offence in life, the many misunderstandings that so often separate persons of different temperament, who, if they understood one another properly, would be tied together with indissoluble bonds. (JN, 9)

Kierkegaard is standing at one of his favourite points in Gilleleje, the sound of the sea and the breadth of the sky envelop him, and in the midst of this grandeur he has a twofold vision. It begins with a deep longing for those beloved ones who are gone. He encounters them in some in-between zone: they seem to be leaving the world of the dead, coming to him; he seems to be stepping beyond the concreteness of his body, the concreteness of the finite world, into their welcoming embrace. He feels so comfortable in their other-worldly arms, as if he has found home. But then the cry of the seagull brings him back, reminds him of the impossibility of this love: they are there, lost to him, he is here, alone in the world.

[13] The title alludes to the following statement of Kierkegaard (under the pseudonym Constantin Constantius): 'Repetition's love is in truth the only happy love … it has the blissful security of the moment' (R, 131–2).

But then a second vision takes shape before his contemplative mind, and in this vision he clearly sees a possibility of love. The 'pettiness' and 'misunderstandings' that usually keep people apart dissolve, and instead there emerges the option of being together; the joyful possibility of firm bonds between self and other. And the vision continues:

> as I stood there alone and forsaken and the power of the sea and the battle of the elements reminded me of my nothingness, while the sure flight of the birds reminded me on the other hand of Christ's words, 'Not a sparrow will fall to the earth without your heavenly Father's will,' I felt at one and the same time how great and how insignificant I am. (Ibid., 10)

There are two forces in conflict here. One reminds Kierkegaard of his powerlessness, his nothingness, the other reminds him of God's love for him; a powerful and encompassing love by virtue of which everything is possible. One force is that of resignation: he is reconciled to his nothingness, he dies to the world; the other is that of affirmation: he nevertheless has his place in this world; his abode is not only among the dead, but also among the living. Kierkegaard deeply wishes that these two forces could always be 'amicably combined'. 'Fortunate the man', he says,

> for whom *this* is possible every moment of his life, in whose breast these two factors have not merely reached an agreement but stretched out their hands to each other and celebrated a wedding … a marriage … that will not be barren but will have blessed fruits visible also in the world to the eyes of the experienced observer. (Ibid., emphasis in the text)

We may read these words as expressing not only a wish, but also a question – a question regarding the way to achieve this desirable harmony, which drives one to creative and productive action that would bear fruit in the world. Remembering his earlier reflection on the bonds between people, and given the metaphor he chooses ('a wedding … a marriage'), we may suppose that the fruits he has in mind are the fruits of love.[14]

In a way, then, Kierkegaard is asking how he should live – so as to love; how he should form his life, so that love would become possible. After all, his vision begins with painfully feeling the *impossibility* of love: he yearns for those beloved ones that are forever gone, those who were irrevocably taken away, those whose death uncompromisingly separated them from him. But simultaneously he also envisions the *possibility* of love: he can feel the blissfulness that human bonds entail, and the providence of God that

[14] See the first deliberation in *Works of Love*.

makes such bliss possible. Kierkegaard has a profound insight regarding an existential position that wholeheartedly accepts one's nothingness while at the same time passionately affirms and rejoices in life and, more specifically, in *love*. This powerful insight reveals the possibility of love in the face of finitude and limitedness: that is, in the existential context of the ephemerality, loss, separation, and death that seem to posit an impassable obstacle on the way of fulfilling love. We may therefore say that by depicting this poetic vision, Kierkegaard is actually asking about the *desirable way to love*, about the *right* way to love. Given the conditions of our existence (that seem to work against the possibility of joyful love), what form should love take so as to become possible nevertheless?

Further, it is important to note that the kind of love that inspires this vision is a special, particular love for concrete persons ('the few dear departed'). At the heart of the problem that stimulates Kierkegaard's insight regarding the paradoxical harmony between two contradicting powers (an insight which is in many ways central to his entire philosophy) is therefore not merely a general, neighbourly love to any person whatsoever. Rather, it is the kind of love that later in his philosophy Kierkegaard refers to as preferential love. It is a concern with *this* kind of love that infuses his early existential reflections, and drives him to ponder the possibility of satisfying relationships of love, thus implicitly raising the following question. How, given the essential obstacles along love's way (temporality, ephemerality, limitedness) should we love; what is the right way to love?

Indeed, Kierkegaard's writings seem almost haunted by this question, especially as it concerns preferential love, and more specifically romantic love.[15] The latter kind of love will also be the focus of the present study. Together with Kierkegaard (although not always in agreement with him), and by using his implicit and explicit discussions of love, I shall ask: what does genuine romantic love look like; what is the right way to love romantically?

Even though he himself does not explicitly formulate this as a question, Kierkegaard's fascination with romantic love cannot be missed. His writings are pervaded by the spirits of unhappy lovers, and their yearning for lost relationships of love. This is particularly conspicuous in the early group of his writings – the group that includes the eminent *Either/Or*, *Repetition*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Stages on Life's Way*, which are known

[15] The term 'preferential love' covers relations of friendship and filial love, as well as relationships of romantic love.

as his 'aesthetic' writings.[16] In the first part of *Either/Or* we meet various lovers, the most famous of whom is the notorious Seducer whose diary is brought before us in its full sinister glory. In *Repetition* we meet a somewhat more reserved lover, but no less elusive and unhappy, the Poet who cannot find in his beloved the mysterious thing that he is really after. In the second part of *Either/Or* we meet a married Judge who presents himself as a happy lover: in two long letters he praises the beauty and truth to be found in marriage. But beneath the apparently perfect surface there are hints of conflicting and darker attitudes, making the reader wonder whether the Judge is as happy a lover as he thinks he is. And indeed in *Stages on Life's Way* we meet the frustrated version of the Judge, the demonic lover, Quidam (i.e. 'Someone'), who desperately wants to love but miserably fails to achieve this. It is only in *Fear and Trembling*, a work which seems to be told in the voice of yet another unhappy lover, that the real possibility of a happy love relationship emerges.[17]

The group of the aesthetic writings which concerns us is distinguished not only by its prominent preoccupation with stories of love but also by its delineation and presentation of the Kierkegaardian 'theory of stages'. According to this theory, there are several paradigmatic ways in which one can live one's life. These are usually divided into three, and are known respectively as the 'aesthetic', the 'ethical', and the 'religious'. The word 'stages' implies that a person's life may change from one of these ways to another, and it suggests a hierarchical order – one stage will be either 'lower' (less developed) or 'higher' (more developed) than another. The development in question, however, is applicable not only to the views of life, but also to the views of love that these writings present. In this study, therefore, I propose to explore the Kierkegaardian *stages of love*. My claim is that in correlation with the various ways available to the existing individual to live his life, so there are various ways open before him to fulfil his

[16] Hannay divides Kierkegaard's authorship into four main categories: the aesthetic works, the dialectical works, the psychological works, and 'the non-pseudonymous and moralizing discourses' (see Hannay 1982: 16–17). I think that this categorization is more illuminating than the more general one that follows Kierkegaard in dividing the authorship simply into 'the aesthetic' (the pseudonymous authorship) and 'the religious' (the non-pseudonymous authorship) because it expresses the diversity existing in the group of the *pseudonymous* works. Of this vast group I shall therefore focus on the 'aesthetic' works, which include the four pivotal works mentioned above.

[17] The pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling* is Johannes de Silentio, who is often identified with the unhappy young man whom he describes as being in love with the princess. De Silentio speaks as one who has not achieved a happy love, but does consider it to be a real possibility.

relationships of love. And in a way similar to that in which one's existence can be developed – beginning with the aesthetic stage and culminating with the religious one – so can one's *love* be developed as well.[18]

Now, in order to assess the development of love, we need a criterion that will enable us to examine the extent to which a form of love is more or less satisfying or good or correct. Returning to Kierkegaard's journal reflections, I suggest that the key to understanding the stages of love lies in their different responses to the essential loss *threatening* love. What do I mean by 'loss', and how does it pose a threat to love?

Actual, potential, and essential loss

Being finite and subject to the passage of time, our existence is pervaded by constant loss. Time goes by and seems to take with it everything that gives meaning to our life. Most often this loss is quiet and inconspicuous, but at the same time it is unstoppable. From this point of view, becoming involved in relationships of love – that is, becoming deeply attached to the essentially evanescent – cannot but lead to misery and pain:

> My heart grew sombre with grief, and wherever I looked I saw only death … My eyes searched everywhere for him, but he was not there to be seen … I lived in misery, like every man whose soul is tethered by the love of things that cannot last and then is agonized to lose them. Only then does he realize the sorry state he is in, and was in even before his loss.[19]

Augustine, who laments the death of his closest friend, believes that it was madness and folly of him to love 'a man who was mortal as though he were never to die'.[20] Loving a finite being who is ultimately doomed to decay and death seems to be *in essence* a state of sorrow: it is to cling in one's soul to something that cannot last forever. Therefore, to become involved in a

[18] There are debates in the secondary literature as to how the theory of stages should be formulated and understood. On the one hand there are scholars who argue that there are four, and even five, stages of development (see, for example, Evans 1999; Westphal 1996) and, on the other hand, there are readings that refuse to see such a progressive or hierarchical connection between the stages at all (see, for example, Jegstrup 2004 and Poole 1993 and 1998). The focus of this study, however, is *love* and *its* development: the less or more satisfying ways to fulfil it, the less or more genuine ways to experience it. Accordingly, the theory of the stages serves here only as a framework – as a background against which the development of love can be clearly manifested. The interpretative questions mentioned above, as well as other questions regarding the theory of the stages, will therefore not be my concern here.

[19] Augustine 1961: 76, 77.

[20] Ibid., 79.