

DE GRUYTER

*Karsten Harries*

# BETWEEN NIHILISM AND FAITH

A COMMENTARY ON *EITHER/OR*



DE  
|  
G

Kierkegaard Studies  
Monograph Series  
21

# Kierkegaard Studies

Edited on behalf of the  
Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre  
by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Hermann Deuser

---

## Monograph Series 21

Edited by  
Niels Jørgen Cappelørn  
and Leonardo F. Lisi

De Gruyter

Karsten Harries

# Between Nihilism and Faith

A Commentary on *Either/Or*

De Gruyter

*Kierkegaard Studies*  
Edited on behalf of the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre  
By Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Hermann Deuser

*Monograph Series*  
Volume 21

Edited by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Leonardo F. Lisi, and Irene Ring

ISBN 978-3-11-022688-1  
e-ISBN 978-3-11-022689-8  
ISSN 1434-2952

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Harries, Karsten.  
Between nihilism and faith : a commentary on Either/Or / Karsten  
Harries.  
p. cm. — (Kierkegaard studies. Monograph series, ISSN 1434-2952 ;  
21)  
Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 978-3-11-022688-1 (hardcover : alk. paper)  
1. Kierkegaard, Søren, 1813–1855. Enten-Eller. I. Title.  
PT8142.E573H37 2010  
198'.9—dc22

2009054044

*Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek*

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;  
detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

© 2010 Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, Berlin/New York

Printing: Hubert & Co. GmbH & Co. KG, Göttingen  
∞ Printed on acid-free paper

Printed in Germany

[www.degruyter.com](http://www.degruyter.com)

## Editorial Note

The present book by Professor Karsten Harries is a landmark in Kierkegaard studies for a number of reasons. It is the first book-length monograph on *Either/Or* ever to appear in English. This is a surprising fact, given this work's centrality in Kierkegaard's oeuvre, and the extent to which it helped cement his fame both in Denmark and abroad. Possibly, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> this neglect is due to the shift to a predominantly theological and biographical focus in Anglo-Saxon Kierkegaard studies during the 1930s and 40s, in the process of which *Either/Or*, with its overt literary qualities and its less explicitly religious dimension, was increasingly sidelined. In this sense too Karsten Harries' study breaks new ground by persistently reading *Either/Or* in the context of a philosophical investigation of the origins and implications of art and aesthetics. This is not a restriction of analytic scope, since to Professor Harries aesthetics always provides an entryway to central philosophical questions of existence in general. As such, *Between Nihilism and Faith* also constitutes a further important exposition of Karsten Harries' own thinking, in which readers will find his usual combination of penetrating philosophical analysis and thorough familiarity with the western intellectual tradition.

The pages that follow are a substantial revision and expansion of Karsten Harries' lectures for his graduate seminar on *Either/Or*, conducted at various times in the Philosophy Department at Yale University. In addition to the standard formatting of the text for publication, as co-editor I have sought to follow Professor Harries' wish to provide some further critical apparatus by adding annotations to secondary literature as well as, occasionally, additional primary sources. This is not intended as an exhaustive overview of the field, but merely as a general aid to the reader interested in pursuing further some of the many issues raised by Harries in the course of his commentary. All errors and oversights in this respect are naturally only my own.

Leonardo F. Lisi

---

1 Leonardo F. Lisi "On the Reception History of *Either/Or* in the Anglo-Saxon World," pp. 331–343.



## Preface and Postscript

### 1

A perhaps trivial indication of what *Either/Or* has meant to me over the years is that this is the only major philosophical work of which I own the first edition, two modest, now black-brown volumes: *Enten-Eller. Et Livs-Fragment*, udgivet af Victor Eremita, Kjøbenhavn 1843. It was a present given to me by George A. Schrader, whose graduate seminar on *Either/Or* I attended and who later was to direct my dissertation on nihilism. Soon I was to teach *Either/Or* myself, initially as the first third of an undergraduate course on existentialism, soon also as a graduate seminar that I repeated a number of times and taught for the last time in the fall of 2007. I am grateful to the many students who with their questions and comments challenged my understanding of this text. I owe special thanks to Leonardo Lisi, whose extraordinary understanding of the whole Kierkegaard made this teacher also a student. For me this seminar was once again an exciting learning experience. It was Lisi who encouraged me to publish my notes for this seminar, agreed to edit the manuscript, and suggested the publisher. I am grateful to him and to the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre for including it in its monograph series.

### 2

From the very beginning my interest in *Either/Or* has been bound up with my continuing preoccupation with the problem of nihilism. It is the same problem that also led me to a lifelong *Auseinandersetzung* with the work of Martin Heidegger. More than any other books, *Either/Or* and *Being and Time* have accompanied my philosophical reflections.

To be sure, these are very different books. Is *Either/Or* even a work of philosophy? Is it not rather the work of a poet, as another one of my

teachers, Louis Mackey, insisted?<sup>1</sup> In *Being and Time* Heidegger thus appears to call the significance of Kierkegaard as a philosopher into question with the following often cited footnote: “In the nineteenth century, Søren Kierkegaard explicitly seized upon the problem of existence as an existentiell problem, and thought it through in a penetrating fashion. But the existential problematic was so alien to him that, as regards his ontology, he remained completely dominated by Hegel and by ancient philosophy as Hegel saw it. Thus there is more to be learned philosophically from his ‘edifying’ writings than from his theoretical ones – with the exception of his treatise on the concept of anxiety.”<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard is credited here with having seized upon the problem of existence, with having “thought it through in a penetrating fashion,” but it would seem that at the time Heidegger did not consider such thinking truly philosophical. And this much must be granted: Kierkegaard thought through the problem of existence without much interest in the ontological questions that so concerned Heidegger: one can imagine Kierkegaard’s disdain for the kind of academic philosophy exemplified for him by Hegel and, if in a different key, still pursued by Heidegger in *Being and Time*. When Kierkegaard seized upon the problem of existence, this was first of all a problem posed by his own tortured self. He never lets the reader forget that at issue is his and the reader’s own situation and salvation. Not that this issue is ever resolved: Kierkegaard seems tossed back and forth between faith and nihilism, buried within himself. But not so completely buried that his anguished struggle with the specter of nihilism fails to powerfully touch the reader. In Kierkegaard’s struggle we recognize a refracted image of a problem we heirs of the Enlightenment and of its profoundly shaken faith in reason all face: How are we living? How should we live?

Kierkegaard leaves us with more questions than answers. But this does not mean that he fails to cast light on the problem of existence. Indeed I found more of an *Existenzerhellung* in Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* than in the second volume of Karl Jaspers’ *Philosophie*, which bears that title.<sup>3</sup>

In his footnote in *Being and Time* Heidegger contrasts Kierkegaard’s concrete, existentiell exploration with the kind of analysis he himself

---

1 Cf. Louis Mackey “Søren Kierkegaard. The Poetry of Inwardness,” pp. 45–107 and *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet*.

2 Martin Heidegger *Being and Time*, p. 494.

3 Karl Jaspers *Philosophie*, vol. 2, *Existenzerhellung*.

hoped to provide, which, still in the tradition of transcendental philosophy, has as its goal the exhibition of the existentials, i. e. the categories constitutive of human being as such, such as being-in-the-world, being-with-others, being-unto-death. Such analysis was to put our understanding of human being on firm ground, providing something like a determination of the essence of man. And Heidegger is right: such an academic undertaking is alien to Kierkegaard, who places the existing individual higher than the universal. He never lets us forget his time, place, situation, and special anguish. Even when he addresses us through the veil of pseudonyms, we are touched by a style, a poetry, a pain that are very much his own and yet speak of the human condition.

But what should this particular individual and his unique situation and state of mind matter to the philosopher concerned, as Heidegger was, to exhibit categories constitutive of human being as such? The question invites a more thoughtful examination of the distinction Heidegger here draws between the author of *Being and Time*, the philosopher concerned with ontological questions, and Kierkegaard, the poet-thinker preoccupied with himself. As Heidegger pursues his argument in *Being and Time* he himself is forced to blur this distinction; he, too, has to recognize that we human beings, and that includes the philosopher, are bound by our specific historical situation. Along with such situatedness goes a particular perspective, a specific world understanding. We moderns no longer are sheltered by the theocentric world of the Middle Ages; the modern world-picture has no room for God. And if the Enlightenment turned to reason to reoccupy the place left vacant by the death of God, the history of the last two centuries has undermined the confidence that reason will bind freedom and keep it responsible. We cannot escape this history, which, as Nietzsche recognized, has issued in a pervasive nihilism. Nor could Kierkegaard. The specter of nihilism haunts all of his writings, as it haunts already German romanticism to which he is so indebted. To exorcize it is his most fundamental concern. And it is the same fundamentally religious concern that has drawn me to Kierkegaard: What today is to bind freedom? To really choose is to bind freedom. *Either/Or* calls us to make such a choice, i. e. to be authentic. But what does it mean to be authentic? How are we to think of such an authentic choice? As autonomous action? As a blind leap? As a leap of faith? As a response to the claim of some transcendent other? *Either/Or* circles around these questions.

I mentioned that it was the specter of nihilism that first let me turn to Kierkegaard. And in my case, too, it was not philosophy that gave life to this specter, but my own personal history, going back to my childhood. My first memories are of war-torn Berlin: of the evening sky, alive with search lights, red night after night with the flames of the burning city; of bomb fragments that we children loved to collect because of their glittering sharp surfaces that tore the pockets of my pants and made my mother unhappy; of an incendiary bomb that crashed through the roof of the house in which we then lived – fortunately my father knew how to deal with this sort of problem; of the bunker he built where he had raised vegetables, thinking it would be safer than the cellar of our house; of the children across the street with whom we had played, until one day they were no longer and where their house had been there was now only a crater.

God was absent from this child's world – absent from it in at least two senses: absent from it first of all in that God did not show himself in that world. What could He have to do with bombs and the death of innocent children? With a war both of my parents knew could not be justified and, after Stalingrad, knew had been lost, even though many millions still had to die, including three of my uncles?

But God was absent from my world also in the sense that in our family there was talk of God only as part of a world that had perished. My father Wolfgang was a physicist. In his world there was no room for God. My mother Ilse was the daughter a Lutheran minister, Otto Großmann, and one of her brothers was to follow in their father's footsteps. She liked to tell the story when the Emperor attended a service at my grandfather's church in Steglitz. But she did so in an amused way that made neither God nor the Emperor seem very important, little more than theatre.

Not so amusing is the story of my grandfather's courageous resistance to the Nazis' attempt to make the church serve the totalitarian state, of his brief arrest by the SA in 1933, after he preached a sermon deemed unacceptable by the party. SA men had occupied the front rows and planted their flag next to the altar. Soon they stormed out in protest, followed by part of the congregation. He was the first pastor in Prussia to be briefly arrested and interrogated for speaking out against the Nazi regime. He retired a year later.

My mother admired her father. But she experienced all institutions that demanded a profession of faith, be it the Party or the Church, as a prison. Already as a teenager she had lost her father's faith, although throughout her long life she struggled with that loss; my father was not burdened by such nostalgia. His reality never could satisfy her poet existence. No longer able to believe in God, she yet uncertainly held on to the religious dimension. It figured in all her poems and plays. There was thus quite a bit of talk about religion in our family, but in ways that presupposed what Nietzsche called the death of God.

## 4

Did my grandfather, the courageous and respected Lutheran minister, believe in God? Later I wondered. I still cherish the three volumes of Karl Jaspers' *Philosophie* that he bought shortly after it appeared in 1932, the only possession of his that has come down to me. I suspect that his was the kind of questioning, philosophical faith endorsed by Jaspers.

These three dark blue volumes were my real introduction to philosophy and although later I turned to other philosophers, especially to Heidegger, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Kant, and Nicholas of Cusa, only now, as I attempt to survey the progress of my own thinking, do I begin to realize how little progress there has been, how much my thinking owes to the teenager's attempt to work his way through these three dense volumes, in whom my grandfather, his courage and his uncertain and yet firm faith remain somehow present.

It was these volumes that first called my attention to Kierkegaard. Jaspers mentions him already in the Preface as one of a small number of thinkers whose thought he needed to confront and appropriate to find his own way.<sup>4</sup> And it is Kierkegaard who merits the first footnote in this long work, which has very few footnotes and avoids making reference to other thinkers: but Kierkegaard had to be mentioned as the thinker who gave existentialism its concept of "Existenz."<sup>5</sup>

In that Preface Jaspers describes Kierkegaard with words that capture succinctly why, I too, have to include Kierkegaard among those few thinkers whom I had to confront and appropriate to find my way. Jas-

---

4 Karl Jaspers *Philosophie*, vol. 1, *Philosophische Weltorientierung*, p. ix.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 15, n. 1.

pers calls Kierkegaard, “den in der Wurzel erschütterten, dessen Redlichkeit vor dem Nichts aus der Liebe zum Sein als dem anderen Möglichen philosophiert.” This brief, difficult to translate description opposes Nothingness and Being. Being is possible. But is it necessary? Will all that is in the end not turn to nothing? Is the final victory of nothing over being, of darkness over light, not what any human being has to recognize, who honestly confronts him- or herself as the mortal individual he or she happens to be? And must this not shake such an individual in his or her very root? What then does courage, fighting for what one believes in, matter? Such questioning honesty, shadowed by the specter of nihilism, helps shape the fundamental mood of all of Kierkegaard’s writings.

This dark mood invites an examination of Kierkegaard’s relationship to German romanticism, as it invites a comparison of Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer, whom the young Nietzsche was to credit with a similar honesty.<sup>6</sup> Such honesty let Schopenhauer judge the world to be without a higher meaning. And one only has to read the “Diapsalmata” that open *Either/Or* to recognize how close the fundamental mood of A is to that of Schopenhauer. To be sure, we must not confuse any of the pseudonyms with Kierkegaard. But with A, Kierkegaard created a caricature of himself that, like any good caricature, captures something essential, if not that unique individual, Søren Kierkegaard. One is thus not surprised to learn that in his Journal for 1854 Kierkegaard recognizes in Schopenhauer a kindred spirit whose thoughts touch his own on many points. Not that he finds himself in agreement with the great pessimist. Quite the opposite: he finds himself in complete disagreement. Still, he finds it strangely revealing that he should be called S. A., Søren Aabye, the inverse of A. S., Arthur Schopenhauer.<sup>7</sup> And is his thought not similarly the inverse of Schopenhauer’s? But how are we to understand this inversion? To return to Jaspers’ characterization: what makes Kierkegaard the inverse of Schopenhauer is his “love of being.” It is such love that alone can overcome Schopenhauerian nihilism and turn it around. Only such love can rescue an existence that has been “shaken in its root” by an honesty that has to recognize that established religion and morality, the spiritual edifice that continues to offer shelter to so many, is in fact a ruin whose foundations have

---

6 Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, Drittes Stück, *Schopenhauer als Erzieher*.

7 Cf. JP 4:3877 / NB29:95, SKS 25, 352–357.

been shaken by that objectifying reason that presides over our science and thus over our modern world picture.

Jaspers and Kierkegaard confirmed my conviction that reason alone offers no support to such love. As Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi knew long ago, nihilism is not unreasonable. Quite the opposite: it is the product of reason. Thus it answers to the truth that presides over science.

## 5

Such texts convinced me, a conviction that has only grown stronger over the years, that if our life is to have meaning we have to call the hegemony of the truth that presides over our science into question, which is not to say that we can responsibly challenge the legitimacy of that truth. Needed is a philosophy that can account both for the limits and the legitimacy of science and makes room for what Jaspers calls the love of being. That love cannot be willed. It is a gift. But how is it given?

Just because it challenges the hegemony of objective truth, Kierkegaard's claim, "Truth is subjectivity," became important to me, even as it invited questioning. Truth is understood here as "*An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness*" – Kierkegaard was thinking of love and faith. This he calls "the highest truth there is for an *existing* person." In such attainment the individual is said to perfect him- or herself. Many would question whether such subjective truth deserves to be called a perfection of knowledge. And as the expression "objective uncertainty" suggests, Kierkegaard, knew very well that first of all "the question about truth is asked objectively, truth is reflected upon objectively as an object to which the knower relates himself."<sup>8</sup> But his distinction between subjective and objective truth helps to bring into focus what is at issue: the value of objective truth: "The way of objective reflection turns the subjective individual into something accidental and thereby turns existence into an indifferent, vanishing something. The way to the objective truth goes away from the subject, and while the subject and subjectivity become indifferent, the truth also becomes indifferent, and that is precisely its objective validity, because the interest, just like the decision, is subjectivity."<sup>9</sup> How can we human beings make our peace with the commitment to objectivity and a truth that threatens to transform the world

---

8 CUP, 199 / SKS 7, 182; CUP, 203 / SKS 7, 186.

9 CUP, 193 / SKS 7, 177.

into the totality of essentially indifferent facts? This is the same question the young Nietzsche raised in *The Birth of Tragedy* and tried to answer by insisting that only as an aesthetic phenomenon can the world and our existence be justified. It is a claim that must be taken seriously. Just this makes it important to confront Nietzsche's aestheticism with the immanent critique of the aesthetic life Kierkegaard offers us with his portrayal of A in the first volume of *Either/Or*. If Nietzsche in the "Attempt at a Self-Criticism" that he later was to add to *The Birth of Tragedy* as a kind of critical preface, accuses himself of a lack of honesty, it is precisely Kierkegaard's honesty that prevents him from embracing the aesthetic and lets him unmask mercilessly all attempts to veil reality with beautiful illusion.

Kierkegaard wants to hold on to truth. But what meaning can we give to "truth" once we have refused to reduce it to that objective truth pursued by science? From the very beginning I have had difficulty with Kierkegaard's Protestant insistence that "Truth is subjectivity." What is truth, if not the agreement of the judgment with its object, i. e. truth as correspondence, a truth so obvious that, as Kant puts it, it can be "geschenkt, und vorausgesetzt,"<sup>10</sup> granted and presupposed, without need for much discussion? But if so, the search for truth cannot build a spiritual home for the existing individual.

What Jaspers, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard did convince me of was that an understanding that reduces reality to the totality of objects has to lose sight of all that can give meaning to our lives. If the pursuit of truth has to be understood as the pursuit of objective truth it has to lead to nihilism. Jacobi and Kant already knew that. But, as Kant also knew, not all that eludes the reach of an objectifying understanding is therefore irrational: Reason itself forces us to acknowledge that the principle of sufficient reason does not circumscribe reality or even reason.

## 6

Such concerns help to explain why I should have decided to write my dissertation on the problem of nihilism. *Either/Or* was then very much on my mind. Given my past it is not surprising that I should have given this brief, brash, and all too quickly written essay the title "In a Strange Land. An Examination of Nihilism." I now realize that, in very abbreviated form and expressed in an inadequate language indebted to

---

10 Immanuel Kant *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 58 / B 82.

Husserl and Jaspers, much of what I have written since is contained *in nuce* already there.

The title seemed appropriate in a number of ways: quite literally I found myself in what in 1961 I still experienced as a strange land, very different from the Germany I had left behind as a teenager and that has remained in many ways my spiritual home, although in another sense not a home at all, more like the ruin of a home one could only dream of, as Heinrich Heine dreamed of Germany: “Ich hatte einst ein schönes Vaterland. Der Eichenbaum Wuchs dort so hoch, die Veilchen nickten sanft. Es war ein Traum.” In my case, too, that beautiful Germany was little more than a dream, fed by long walks in the woods, reinforced by poems, songs, and stories. The Germany in which I grew up was a house in ruins long before the first bombs fell, and this in more ways than one. I have always been dreaming of some utopian home, figured by different places, fully aware that such dreams have to remain dreams, that a final homecoming would mean death. We are essentially wayfarers, dreaming of home. It is such dreams that give direction to our lives and fill us with hope.

The epigram that follows the dissertation’s title helped to explain it: “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” The question is posed in Psalm 137, which begins “By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.” I too was looking for some song that would exorcize the specter of nihilism. But where was I to find it?

With my dissertation I sought to “examine nihilism in the hope that in laying bare its roots, an indication of the road which will lead beyond nihilism will be given.” Everything I have written since has continued that examination. And, as he was then, Kierkegaard has remained a constant companion and interlocutor. That is especially true of *Either/Or*. A, the pseudonymous author of the first volume, provided me not only with the portrait of a romantic nihilist, but also with a demonstration of the necessary failure of any attempt to find an aesthetic solution to the problem of meaning. Kierkegaard’s aesthete attempts to put the free subject relying on his or her imagination and inventiveness in the place left vacant by the death of God. As the unhappy hero of Schubert’s *Winterreise* defiantly sings: if God does not show himself on earth, we ourselves have to become gods. The young Nietzsche knew the *Winterreise* well and I wonder what shadow its hero’s shattering descent into madness cast over Nietzsche’s own attempt to put man in the place left vacant by the death of God. Kierkegaard could have taught

him that this attempt must fail. But Nietzsche never did find the time to deal with “the psychological problem Kierkegaard,” as he had planned not long before his own descent into madness.<sup>11</sup> Especially those taken by Nietzsche’s analysis of and response to the death of God have a great deal to learn from “the psychological problem Kierkegaard.” By demonstrating that we lack the strength to invent meanings or values, the first volume of *Either/Or* helped me, at any rate, to sharpen my critique of any attempt to expect from the aesthetic an answer to the problem of nihilism.

## 7

Where are we to look? If we cannot say A must we say B? But there is no path A could have taken in good faith that would have led him back to the ethical as represented by Judge William. The real either-or, it seems to me, is not between the aesthetic and the ethical, but between the tragic and the religious, as A puts it in “The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama.”<sup>12</sup>

I first read *Either/Or* in Emanuel Hirsch’s beautiful German translation. Given my background, it is not surprising that I should have been especially struck by Kierkegaard’s proximity to, but also distance from German romanticism. The latter was very much part of my spiritual world. It answered to my love of nature – when I was little my classmates had called me the *Waldheini*, the fellow who always wanted to drag his playmates away from their games into the woods, and if no one could be found to join him, would go there by himself and lose himself in the trees’ green tent. I still feel that urge. And I still find missing in Kierkegaard, as also in Hegel, that loving appreciation of the beauty of nature that Kant took to be a mark of a good person. Reading Kierkegaard I find myself indoors in more than one sense. Turning from a poet like Joseph von Eichendorff to Kierkegaard is a bit like stepping into a somewhat stifling bourgeois home, the wind rattling at the windows, beckoning me to step outside to a different life, to resist the call of the abyss that we all, as free beings, carry within. Kierkegaard could not

---

11 Letter of February 19, 1888 to Georg Brandes, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke*, ed. Karl Schlechta, vol. 3, p. 1278.

12 *EO1*, 146 / *SKS 2*, 146.

escape the pull of the latter. He is, as Louis Mackey called him, “the poet of inwardness.”

I remain on guard, when confronted with such poetry. Like Kant, I remain convinced that the beauty of art must remain grounded in an appreciation of the beauty of nature, including human nature. And does not beauty hold the key to love, as Plato taught? Beauty cannot be invented, it must be discovered. Missing in Kierkegaard is the appreciation of beautiful nature that to the romantics, as already to the Enlightenment, promises an answer to that death of God proclaimed, long before Nietzsche, by the dead Christ in the nightmarish dream-vision Jean Paul Richter relates in his *Siebenkäs*. Faith and joy return as he wakes up and the beauty of this ephemeral earth dispels the shadow cast by the horrifying nightmare.<sup>13</sup> My attention was first called to this extraordinary text by Walter Rehm’s *Experimentum Medietatis*,<sup>14</sup> which also led me to recognize the nihilistic side of German romanticism, that side which bears such an evident debt to Fichte’s idealism. Kierkegaard’s rejection of both romanticism and idealism are part of his attack on a rationalism that, as Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi already recognized, has to lead to nihilism. Rehm’s profound understanding of this constellation helped make me a more thoughtful reader of Kierkegaard. Rehm’s *Kierkegaard und der Verführer* remains the most helpful book I have read on Kierkegaard.

## 8

I have long been surprised by how little attention aestheticians and art historians have paid to Kierkegaard. In most surveys and readers he hardly figures. And yet I know of no thinker who can give us a deeper insight into the meaning of modern art, where once again I am thinking first of all of the first volume of *Either/Or*, especially of one brief, seemingly light-weight essay, “The Rotation of Crops.” Playfully developing a concept he found in Friedrich Schlegel Kierkegaard here offers us an incisive analysis of “the interesting.” Today this analysis seems more relevant than ever: An art world infatuated with the unexpected and there-

---

13 Jean Paul Richter *Siebenkäs*, Erstes Blumenstück, “Rede des toten Christus vom Weltgebäude herab, daß kein Gott sei.”

14 Walter Rehm *Experimentum Medietatis*.

fore interesting, with what Lyotard celebrates as *novatio*,<sup>15</sup> demands ever more outrageous action, and this demand has to push art towards its own self-de-construction. Has the interesting not come to replace the beautiful and the sublime as the aesthetic category that does the greatest justice to today's art production? But the pursuit of the interesting must end in that boredom from which it seeks to escape.

One art historian to have recognized the importance of "The Rotation of Crops" was Hans Sedlmayr in his "Kierkegaard über Picasso." It appeared in a volume with the suggestive subtitle "Übergangene Perspektiven zur modernen Kunst," "Neglected Perspectives on Modern Art." In my first book, *The Meaning of Modern Art* I took advantage of this neglect by devoting a key chapter to the interesting.<sup>16</sup> Later I used it to illuminate an aspect of postmodern architecture.<sup>17</sup> Whatever success these efforts enjoyed they owed first of all to Kierkegaard.

Even more important to my work in aesthetics has been the essay immediately preceding "The Rotation of Crops": "The First Love." With his portrayal of Emmeline, the heroine of Scribe's play, Kierkegaard's furnished me with an anatomy of the Kitsch personality. I shall have more to say about Kierkegaard's Emmeline in Chapter Seven. She provided me with a key to the analysis of Kitsch as an aesthetic category essential to understanding, not just the art of our time, but also our politics and our religion.<sup>18</sup> Kitsch is the aesthetic expression of bad faith, but of a bad faith that, while it suspects, refuses to acknowledge that it is in bad faith. The destruction of the old value system lets us seek shelter in its ruin. Thus religious Kitsch seeks to elicit religious emotion in the absence of faith, while erotic Kitsch seeks to provide a simulacrum of love in the absence of love.

Not that Kierkegaard used or could have known the so suggestive word "Kitsch": it was coined only some decades later, to refer to particular kind of bad art. As the aesthetic expression of bad faith, Kitsch was analyzed and attacked by Theodor W. Adorno, Hermann Broch, Clement Greenberg, and more recently Roger Scruton. In their differ-

---

15 Jean-François Lyotard "Answer to the Question: What is the Postmodern," p. 10.

16 Karsten Harries "The Pursuit of the Interesting" in *The Meaning of Modern Art*, pp. 49–60.

17 Karsten Harries "Modernity's Bad Conscience."

18 See "Kitsch" and "Realism and Kitsch" in *The Meaning of Modern Art*, pp. 49–60, 144–152. Also "Waarom moeten we bang zijn voor kitsch," trans. Jan Willem Reimtsma of "Why Should We Be Afraid of Kitsch?"

ent ways they would have us understand Kitsch as a symptom of a world gone astray.

That the term originated in Munich, in the second half of the nineteenth century, this age of the decorated shed, is significant. Kitsch belongs with this age of functional sheds dressed up in borrowed ornament. And had the culture of the age not also become such a decorated shed? Had religion not also degenerated into borrowed decoration? That is how Schopenhauer had come to understand the neo-gothic churches and the state religion of his day.

9

The reader of *Either/Or* will note how, like Emmeline, Judge William, too, is a proud defender of First Love. To be sure, he gives us a thoughtful, well reasoned defense of both first love and marriage that deserves careful consideration. But despite this, there is the nagging question: just how profound is the difference between this self-satisfied member of the establishment, secure in his religion, his marriage, and his service to society and the rather silly, if in her silliness endearing, heroine of Scribe's play? Is he an authentic actor, while she is patently inauthentic, a victim of the romantic tales she has read? Judge William after all has chosen and resolutely taken his place in society. He acts and thinks as a man should think and act in his position.

But how are we to understand this choice? Is he doing more than playing the part his birth and society assigned him? But is he then not inauthentic, because content to accept the authority, not of some romantic tale to be sure, but of what has come to be expected and accepted? But what would it mean to live authentically?

It is easy to poke fun at Judge William. It was George Schrader, who in his seminar on *Either/Or* invited us students to imagine the Seducer having written another *commentarius perpetuus*, detailing his seduction, now not of Cordelia, but of the Judge's wife. Or was it she who seduced him? Either way – is there anything in the text of *Either/Or* that would rule out such an affair? And if not, what does this tell us about the Judge? Has he placed his fiction of the faithful wife before the real person? It is striking how the Judge leaves this woman to whom he would seem to owe his self-satisfied life as a husband and father without the contours that would allow the reader to imagine her as a being of flesh and blood. Cordelia is much less of a cipher. So just what is it

that distinguishes him from the comic heroine of the First Love? In both cases the preconceived idea of the beloved seems to block the encounter of one concrete individual and an equally concrete other.

## 10

It is, I suggested, easy to have fun with Kierkegaard's Judge. One statement that invites such fun, a statement at any rate that I stumbled over when first teaching *Either/Or* and that kept me thinking, is his pronouncement that "of a hundred men who go astray in the world, ninety-nine are saved by women, and one is saved by an immediate divine grace."<sup>19</sup> Comforting, at least for men, if somewhat hard to accept, is the presupposed conviction that all men are saved. Can we still make sense of this pronouncement after two world wars and the holocaust, after millions of innocent victims, who were displaced, violated, murdered? Are villains and victims all saved? But perhaps Kierkegaard's Copenhagen was still the sort of place where a Judge William did not have to feel immediately contradicted by reality.

But if I could share the Judge's happy outlook, I would make the ratio much more extreme: I would rather say that of a 1000 men who are saved, 999 are saved by women and one by an immediate divine grace, and even that ratio does not seem extreme enough: I remain suspicious of grace that is not mediated by another human being. Immediate divine grace, not mediated by some person, threatens our humanity, which demands that we remain open to and engage others.

But what is really questionable is the Judge's comfortably heterosexual, masculine perspective: are only men in need of salvation? Are women free of original sin? Has Kierkegaard's Lutheran Judge forgotten the story of the fall? To be sure, in the same place he repeats that a woman corrupted man, but adds that "corruption comes from man, salvation from woman." Judge William would appear to see every woman as ideally remaining "in the pure and innocent peace of immediacy." The image of the Immaculata comes to mind, of the Virgin who was born free of the stain of sin, incapable of the prideful self-assertion that would make man the master and possessor of nature.

I was thinking of this passage when not long ago I sat in a small cemetery church in the Alpine Leizach valley, looking up at the stuccoed bar-

---

19 *EO2*, 207 / *SKS* 3, 199.

oque ceiling, showing in the center of the nave vault the monogram of Mary, encircled by twelve stars, between similar monograms for Joseph and Jesus. I thought of Kierkegaard's Judge because he not only invites us to understand every mother in the image of Mary, but also to understand every father in the image of Joseph: "Children belong to the innermost, hidden life of the family, and to this bright-dark mysteriousness one ought to direct every earnest or God-fearing thought to this subject. But then it will also appear that every child has a halo about its head; every father will also feel that there is more in the child than what it owes to him. Yes, he will feel that it is a trust and that in the beautiful sense of the word he is only a stepfather. The father who has not felt this has always taken in vain this dignity as a father."<sup>20</sup> That is to say, the child does not really belong to the father. It is a gift. To take seriously one's role as a father is to recognize that our life becomes meaningful only when care for the child, a unique individual, who hopefully will be when we are no longer, becomes a central part of our life. Being a father in this sense cures pride. And just as in my church Mary occupies the middle between Joseph and Jesus, so the mother holds the middle between father and child.

But the world that built this church is no longer our world; we are separated from that world by the Enlightenment. I can only imagine how A might have smiled at his old friend's admonishing words. He knew how thoroughly he had left such reflections behind, which nostalgically conjure up a world that has perished. Did the Judge's word awaken in him at least a trace of such nostalgia? If so, he might have buried it with thoughts of the proximity of silly Emmeline and his lovable, silly old friend. As the avant-garde artist feels superior to the bourgeois who finds spiritual shelter in his Kitsch, so he might have felt superior to the Judge.

## 11

In "The Tragic In Ancient Drama" A calls our age "conceited enough to disdain the tears of tragedy," but also "conceited enough to want to do without mercy"; and he wonders, "what, after all, is human life, the human race, when these two things are taken away? Either the sadness of the tragic or the profound sorrow and profound joy of religion."<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche attempted to turn to the first, recognizing that a full self-affirma-

---

20 EO2, 72–73 / SKS 3, 77.

21 EO1, 146 / SKS 2, 146.

tion requires us to renounce what Sartre took to be our fundamental project: the project to become God. Sartre thought God a contradiction and this impossible project doomed to fail. He could have illustrated this project with Kierkegaard's A: again and again we find A striving for a godlike self-sufficiency. And Kierkegaard also could have shown him that this project is vain and must end in despair. Nietzsche recognized that to escape this dismal conclusion, we human beings must learn, that willing power, we yet lack power, must conquer the spirit of revenge, that ill will against time and its "it was," in which Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* discovered the deepest source of our self-alienation, must learn to let go of the anxious struggle with the nothing that so preoccupied Kierkegaard. Tragedy seems to point the way towards an affirmation of life that does not surrender "that honesty before the nothing" Jaspers discovered in Kierkegaard.

Why then did Kierkegaard not also seize this side of A's either-or and embrace a tragic sense of life? Jaspers hints at the answer when he speaks of Kierkegaard's "love of being." The "Ultimatum" speaks of such love, speaks of it in a way that recognizes the power of the Nothing, recognizes that reason cannot justify the horrors of this world, recognizes, as Nietzsche did, the force of Schopenhauerian pessimism. Today the very attempt at a theodicy presupposes a heart of stone. But how can we understand this absurd love of being? As love of creation and its inscrutable creator? But we must not divorce love of God from love of man, *agape* from *eros*. The transcendent must descend and incarnate itself in a human being. That descent is a presupposition of the turn from tragedy towards religion. Judge William is right to insist on the saving power of a very human love, a love that wants to give birth, if perhaps not in a literal, then a figural sense. Such a human love must mediate the love of being, if such love is to exorcize the specter of nihilism.

Karsten Harries  
June 20, 2009

## Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Diapsalmata	12
3. Immediacy and Reflection	25
4. Don Juan	41
5. Modern Tragedy	51
6. The Fellowship of the Dead	62
7. Kitsch	76
8. The Rotation of Crops	89
9. The Diary of the Seducer	99
10. In Defense of Marriage	111
11. Two Concepts of Freedom	125
12. The Meaning of "Either-Or"	137
13. Ultimatum	149
Bibliography	171
Abbreviations	177



# 1. Introduction

## 1

In this seminar we will be concerned with Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, the first of his pseudonymous works. It is preceded only by the publication of his extensive review of H. C. Andersen *From the Papers of One Still Living*, in 1838 and by his dissertation, *On the Concept of Irony*, which he presented for his master's degree in 1841. We shall be reading *Either/Or* from beginning to end, although we shall spend more time on the first volume.

When reading Kierkegaard, and especially *Either/Or*, it is important to keep in mind both the biographical and the cultural context.

## 2

Kierkegaard was born on May 5, 1813 in Copenhagen, the last of the seven children born to his father's second wife, Ane Sørensdatter Lund. There he died on November 11, 1855 and he rarely left the city. He did make four trips to Berlin. The first – Kierkegaard left Copenhagen in October 1841 – was made in part to escape from that city after his broken engagement with Regine Olsen. He ended up staying only five months – originally he had planned to spend one and a half years, in part to hear the old Schelling (who soon disappointed him).<sup>1</sup> Much of *Either/Or* was written in these months. The second time, in 1843, he stayed for nearly two months. He had left Copenhagen because he was upset by what he thought was a friendly nod at Easter Sunday evensong by his former fiancée – this time he wrote parts of *Repetition* and *Fear and Trembling*. Two more brief visits followed. Other than that he left Zealand only on two other occasions. Once to Sweden and another time to the place his father was born. The father had died in

---

1 For a general overview of Kierkegaard's relation to Schelling, cf. Tonny Aagaard Olesen "A Historical Introduction to Kierkegaard's Schelling," esp. pp. 234–248 on Kierkegaard's Berlin trip.

August 1838. Kierkegaard made the latter trip in 1840 after he passed his examination in theology *cum laude*.<sup>2</sup>

Kierkegaard entered the university in 1830, when he was 17. It may be worth noting that unlike Nietzsche, who excelled in everything but mathematics, Kierkegaard, in his Second Examination, received *laudabilis* for history, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and *laud prae caeteris* for lower mathematics, higher mathematics, theoretical philosophy, practical philosophy and physics.<sup>3</sup> When he was twenty he began his journal.

Revealing is the journal entry of August 1, 1835: “What I really need is to be clear about *what I am to do*, not what I must know, except in the way knowledge must precede all action. It is a question of understanding my own destiny, of seeing what the Deity really wants *me* to do; the thing is to find a truth which is truth *for me*, to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*. And what use would it be in this respect if I were to discover a so-called objective truth, or if I worked my way through the philosophers’ systems and were able to call them all to account on request, point out inconsistencies in every single circle? And what use would it be in that respect to be able to work out a theory of the state, and put all the pieces from so many places into one whole, construct a world which, again, I myself did not inhabit but merely held up for others to see? What use would it be to be able to propound the meaning of Christianity, to explain many separate facts, if it had *no* deeper meaning for *myself* and *my life*?”<sup>4</sup> Note the way both Hegel and Kant are here called into question. More and more Kierkegaard at this time becomes uncertain of Christianity. On October 17 he remarks: “*Philosophy and Christianity can never be united*.”<sup>5</sup> Here it is philosophy that is given first place. As he turns away from Christianity, the problem of where to discover meaning becomes ever more pressing. At this time Kierkegaard comes to explore the aesthetic life, both in theory and in practice. In 1836 he may have had an encounter with a prostitute.<sup>6</sup>

---

2 Kierkegaard’s trip to Jutland in 1840 has recently been extensively researched by Peter Tudvad in his *Kierkegaards Jyllandsrejse*.

3 Alastair Hannay *Kierkegaard*, p. 46.

4 *KJN* 1, 19 / *SKS* 17, 24.

5 *KJN* 1, 25 / *SKS* 17, 30.

6 This claim, frequently repeated in the early secondary literature on Kierkegaard (cf. e.g. Lowrie *A Short Life*, p. 100), is based on a journal entry from 1843, where Kierkegaard describes the following scenario: “In his early youth, while in an unbalanced state, a person once permitted himself to get carried away and visit a prostitute. The whole affair is forgotten. Now he wants to

Into that year also falls his discovery of Georg Hamann, who helped him reverse his judgment about the relative merits of philosophy and religion.<sup>7</sup> In these years he immersed himself in Hegel. Hamann helped him to gain a critical distance from the philosopher.

When he was 25, in the night following August 8, 1838, Kierkegaard's father died. It marked a turning point in Kierkegaard's life, the beginning of a return to Christianity, of his continuous becoming a Christian: "It is claimed that arguments against Christianity arise out of doubt. This is a total misunderstanding. The arguments against Christianity arise out of insubordination, reluctance to obey, mutiny against all authority. Therefore, until now the battle against objections has been shadow-boxing, because it has been intellectual combat with doubt instead of being ethical combat against mutiny."<sup>8</sup> At the time thoughts of courting Regine Olsen developed. The death of his father had left him with a large house and reasonably wealthy. After his return from Jutland in August 1840 he began to actively approach her. She almost immediately accepted his proposal of marriage – and almost immediately he felt he had made a mistake. Kierkegaard never did feel comfortable in the relation. The final break came on October 12, 1841. By then he had defended and published his dissertation for the master's degree.<sup>9</sup> Two weeks later he was off for Berlin. By March 6 he was back in Copenhagen, despite his plan to spend a year and half in Berlin.

---

marry. Then the anxiety awakens. He is tortured day and night by the possibility that he might be a father – that somewhere in the world there could live a creature who owed its life to him." (*KJN* 2, 151 / *SKS* 18, 163–164.) As Hannay suggests, however, and as more recent scholarship agrees, there is ultimately little evidence that this entry in fact is meant to refer to Kierkegaard himself, rather than being a fictional setting (*Alastair Hannay Kierkegaard*, p. 68).

7 Kierkegaard's relation to Hamann has recently been documented in Sergia Karen Hay "Sharing Style and Thesis: Kierkegaard's Appropriation of Hamann's Work."

8 *JP* 1:778 / *SKS* 20, 87.

9 Alastair Hannay notes, "the dissertation gave [Kierkegaard] the title of *Magister*, but some years later the title for the degree was changed to Doctor" (*Alastair Hannay Kierkegaard*, p. 460, n. 69).

## 3

By now we have arrived at *Either/Or*, so let me turn to it. The Seducer himself is supposed to have been modeled on P. L. Møller. Judge William, who is supposed to be the author of the second volume, is said to have been modeled on J. V. Jacobson, a judge assessor and “the oldest and most worthy member” in the group of young men with whom Kierkegaard shared his meals when at the university.<sup>10</sup> The earlier parts of the work antedate the break-up with Regine Olsen. Here are the approximate dates:<sup>11</sup>

## Vol. I:

Preface (November, 1842)

Diapsalmata (before March 6, 1842)

The Immediate Erotic Stages (completed June 13, 1842)

The Tragic in Ancient Drama (completed January 30, 1842)

Silhouettes (completed July 25, 1842)

The First Love (December, 1841–January, 1842)

The Unhappiest One (after March 6, 1842)

Rotation of Crops (before March 6, 1842)

The Seducer’s Diary (January–April 14, 1842)

## Vol. II:

The Esthetic Validity of Marriage (completed by December 7, 1841)

The Balance between the Esthetic and the Ethical (August–September, 1842)

Ultimatum (written after May 6, 1842)

In the late summer or early fall of 1841, not long before his trip to Berlin, Kierkegaard has the idea for *Either/Or* and writes the first outlines. Immediately after his arrival in Berlin he begins the draft for “The Esthetic Validity of Marriage,” which he completes by December 7. By the beginning of January he has finished the draft for “The First love” and also begins work on “The Seducer’s Diary,” as well as completing the draft for “The Tragic in Ancient Drama” by the end of the month. In the period leading up to his departure from Berlin in the first days of March he must have worked on “Diapsalmata” as well as “Ro-

<sup>10</sup> Lowrie *A Short Life*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> The following is based on SKS K2–3, 38–58.

tation of Crops.” After his return to Copenhagen on March 6 he completes “The Seducer’s Diary” and begins work on “The Immediate Erotic Stages,” which he finishes by June 13. On July 25 he finishes the draft to “Silhouettes,” at which point he presumably also finishes “The Unhappiest One.” “Ultimatum” would also most likely have been finished at some point after his return to Copenhagen. “The Balance” can have been written no earlier than May, and presumably not until August or September. Eremita’s “Preface” concludes the work on the manuscript in November of 1842.

The whole straddles the time of the break-up. Here it is important to keep in mind that the first letter of the second volume was written first. In other words, Kierkegaard began with a defense of the moral life, of the sort of life he may have hoped to live with the help of Regine Olsen. As the target of this defense he had an aesthete in mind, the kind of person exemplified by the Seducer, not so very different from the person he himself had aspired to be for a while and found celebrated in the writings of the German romantics, especially of Friedrich Schlegel, one of the main targets of the *Concept of Irony* – where it seems strange that when Kierkegaard proposed to Regine she had been pursued by one Fritz Schlegel, whom she later was to marry. It must have been an enormously suggestive coincidence to Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard thus begins with a defense of the moral life. As he went on, the hollowness of that defense and the strength of the position represented by A must have suggested itself, underscored no doubt by his inability to go through with the engagement. And yet that position is presented as leading to a life in despair. The completion of his work on volume one thus forces Kierkegaard to substantially revise his first draft of “The Esthetic Validity” as well as to add the second letter. But the tension between these two positions has already set the stage for the third alternative sketched in the final Ultimatum, which returns to the religious, but in a higher sense than that embraced by the Judge. The ideas thus undergo a development. Whereas in the beginning Kierkegaard seems to adopt pretty much the fundamentally Hegelian critique of the romantics he had himself put forward in the dissertation, increasingly he seems to see strength in the rejected position, which Hegel, with his faith in the power of reason, had not seen so clearly. It is to this context that I want to turn now.

Once more let me return to the entry of August 1, 1835. Let me pick up where I left off: “What use would it be if truth were to stand there before me, cold and naked, not caring whether I acknowledge it or not, inducing an anxious shiver rather than trusting devotion? Certainly I won’t deny that I still accept an *imperative of knowledge*, and that through it one can also influence people, but *then it must be taken up alive in me*, and *this* is what I now see as the main point. It is this my soul thirsts for as the African deserts thirst for water.”<sup>12</sup> Kierkegaard begins by contrasting the *imperative of the understanding* with what is *livingly embodied* in him. The latter is necessary to living a complete life. But what allows us to lead such a life? Required is a focal point. The rhetoric suggests the traditional understanding of the beautiful as sensible perfection, as a whole held together by the *focus perfectionis*, the work’s theme.<sup>13</sup> Kierkegaard applies this model to life. The language thus suggests an aesthetic approach to life. The meaningful life requires a focus. Only then is it really complete. Such a focal point is contrasted with the unfathomable sea of amusement as well as with the profundity of the understanding in which he has in vain sought anchorage. “Such a focal point is something I too have looked for. Vainly I have sought an anchorage, not just in the depths of knowledge, but in the bottomless sea of pleasure. I have felt the well-night irresistible power with which one pleasure holds out its hand to another; I have felt that false kind of enthusiasm which it is capable of producing. I have also felt the tedium, the laceration, which ensues. I have tasted the fruits of the tree of knowledge and have relished them time and again.”<sup>14</sup>

No doubt, for a moment he thought he had found this focus in Regine Olsen. But this focus, he soon came to be convinced, she could not provide. (Cf. Hölderlin’s contrasting understanding of his Diotima.)<sup>15</sup> “Had I not honored her more than myself as my future wife, had I not been prouder of her honor than of my own, I would have held my tongue and fulfilled her wish and mine, let myself be married to her – so many a marriage conceals little stories. I didn’t want that, she

---

12 KJN 1, 19–20 / SKS 17, 24–25.

13 Cf. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten *Reflections on Poetry*, § 66, p. 62; and *Metaphysica*, § 73.

14 KJN 1, 21 / SKS 17, 26.

15 Friedrich Hölderlin *Hyperion*.

would have been my concubine, and then I would rather have murdered her. – But if I were to explain myself, I would have had to initiate her into terrible things, my relationship to Father, his melancholy, the eternal night brooding deep inside me, my going astray, my desires and excesses, which in the eyes of God are nevertheless perhaps not so glaring....”<sup>16</sup> The word “concubine” may suggest that Kierkegaard wanted to avoid the kind of marriage that he thought his father had had with his mother.

But who here failed whom? Kierkegaard himself speaks of his ghostly nature: “Suppose I had married her. Let us assume it. What then? In the course of a half year or less she would have been unhinged. There is – and this is both the good and the bad in me – something spectral about me, something no one can endure who has to see me every day and have a real relationship to me. Yes, in the light overcoat in which I am usually seen, it is another matter. But at home it will be evident that basically I live in a spirit world. I was engaged to her for one year, and she really did not know me. – Consequently she would have been shattered.”<sup>17</sup> As we have seen, as he himself describes it, Kierkegaard’s search for a focal point, for an anchor, is placed in the sea of amusement.

## 5

Earlier I suggested that Kierkegaard applies an aesthetic, in his own words a poetic, model to life. As he puts this in *The Concept of Irony*: “every human being has an inalienable claim upon [it] – to live poetically.”<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* comes to mind and its claim that only as an aesthetic phenomenon can life be justified. And it would seem that what is called for here is not all that difficult to achieve: indeed Kierkegaard tells us that everyone can live aesthetically: “let it above all be said that anyone can live poetically who truly wants to do so. If we ask what poetry is, we may say in general that it is victory over the world; it is through a negation of the imperfect actuality that poetry opens up a higher actuality, expands and transfigures the imperfect into the perfect and thereby assuages the deep pain that wants to

---

16 *KJN* 2, 165 / *SKS* 18, 178–179.

17 *JP* 6:6488 / *SKS* 22, 226.

18 *CI*, 299 / *SKS* 1, 332.

make everything dark. To that extent, poetry is a kind of reconciliation, but it is not the true reconciliation, for it does not reconcile me with the actuality in which I am living; no transubstantiation of the given actuality takes place by virtue of this reconciliation, but it reconciles me with the given actuality by giving me another, a higher and more perfect actuality. The greater the contrast, the less perfect the actual reconciliation, so that when all is said and done there is often no reconciliation but rather an enmity.”<sup>19</sup> Kierkegaard ties this project of living poetically to Fichte: “The Fichtean principle that subjectivity, the *I*, has constitutive validity, is the sole omnipotence, was grasped by Schlegel and Tieck, and on that basis they operated in the world. In this there was a twofold difficulty. In the first place, the empirical and finite *I* was confused with the eternal *I*; in the second place, metaphysical actuality was confused with historical actuality. Thus a rudimentary metaphysical position was summarily applied to actuality. Fichte wanted to construct the world, but he had in mind a systematic construction. Schlegel and Tieck wanted to obtain a world.”<sup>20</sup>

To the romantics Kierkegaard opposes Hegel: “Here we perceive that this irony was not in the service of the world spirit. It was not an element of the given actuality that must be negated and superseded by a new element, but it was all of historical actuality that it negated in order to make room for a self-created actuality. It was not subjectivity that should forge ahead here, since subjectivity was already given in world situations, but it was an exaggerated subjectivity, a subjectivity raised to the second power. We also perceive here that this irony was totally unjustified and that Hegel’s hostile behavior toward it is entirely in order.”<sup>21</sup> The first among these ironists is Friedrich Schlegel, where Kierkegaard is thinking especially of his novel *Lucinde* (1799), a not very good, but historically important work:<sup>22</sup> “The subject for discussion here is Freidrich Schlegel’s celebrated novel *Lucinde*, the gospel of Young Germany and the system for its *Rehabilitation des Fleisches*, which was an abomination to Hegel.”<sup>23</sup> The reference to the Young Germany is ex-

---

19 *CI*, 297 / *SKS* 1, 330–331.

20 *CI*, 275 / *SKS* 1, 311.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Heinrich Heine remarked about *Lucinde*: “Die Mutter Gottes mag es dem Verfasser verzeihen, daß er dieses Buch geschrieben; nimmermehr verzeihen es ihm die Musen.” Cited by Hermann Wendel in his review of Friedrich Schlegel’s *Lucinde* and Schleiermacher’s *Vertraute Briefe über Friedrich Schlegels Lucinde*.

23 *CI*, 286 / *SKS* 1, 321.

plained by a recent uproar in the German literary world, caused by Karl Gutzkow's decision to republish Schleiermacher's *Vertraute Briefe*, which had first appeared anonymously in 1800, with his preface. The decision to republish that work was made to protest the decision of the editors of a projected publication of Schleiermacher's *Works* (Schleiermacher himself later was to distance himself from this early effort) that was to appear in 1835. This was the same year in which Gutzkow's best-known novel *Wally die Zweiflerin* was published, only to be immediately forbidden in Prussia because of its erotic content. In 1836 Gutzkow was condemned to a month in prison for having ridiculed religion.

Talk of a rehabilitation of the flesh may suggest a new paganism. But with Hegel Kierkegaard insists that we cannot return to the world of the ancients. The spirit has progressed to a point that rules out such a return.

But such a return is not even intended by the romantic ironist: "Now, if it were possible to reconstruct a vanished age, we still would have to reconstruct it in all its purity, Greek culture, for example, in all its naïveté. But this romanticism does not do. It is not really Greek culture that it reconstructs but an unknown part of the world that it discovers. And not only this, but its enjoyment is extremely refined, because it not only wishes to enjoy naïvely but in its enjoyment also wants to be conscious of the destruction of the given morality. The point, so to speak, of its enjoyment is to smirk at the morality under which others, so it thinks, are sighing, and herein resides the free play of ironic arbitrariness."<sup>24</sup> Here is how Schlegel's hero Julian presents his purpose: "'No purpose, however, is more purposeful for myself and for this work, for my love for it and for its own structure, than to destroy at the very outset all that part we call order, remove it, and claim explicitly and affirm actually the right to a charming confusion.' He hopes to achieve the purely poetic in this manner, and as he abandons all understanding and lets fantasy alone prevail, the power of the imagination may succeed (for him and the reader, too, if he wants to do likewise) in securing this movement and positioning [*Mellehverandre*] in a simple eternally moving image."<sup>25</sup> That romantic irony invites comparison with Dostoevsky's Man from the Underground should be evident.

Kierkegaard's problem is how to live authentically. To live authentically one has to first awaken to one's freedom. Irony brings about such an awakening. In this sense it is a necessary condition of authenticity: "In

---

24 *CI*, 288–289 / *SKS* 1, 323.

25 *CI*, 292 / *SKS* 1, 326.

our age there has been much talk about the importance of doubt for science and scholarship, but what doubt is to science, irony is to personal life. Just as scientists maintain that there is no true science without doubt, so it may be maintained with the same right that no genuinely human life is possible without irony.<sup>26</sup> But irony needs to be mastered, Kierkegaard insists. And does not Hegel present himself to us, as he is presented by Kierkegaard, as the master of irony? Such mastery implies the turn from a merely negative to a positive freedom. Kierkegaard points to Goethe as a model: “The reason Goethe’s poet-existence was so great was that he was able to make his poet-life congruous with his actuality.”<sup>27</sup> Poetic living requires responsible submission to the actuality to which the poet belongs: “In other words, the poet does not live poetically by creating a poetic work, for if it does not stand in any conscious and inward relation to him, his life does not have the inner infinity that is an absolute condition for living poetically (thus we also see poetry frequently finding an outlet through unhappy individualities – indeed, the painful destruction of the poet is a condition for the poetic production), but he lives poetically only when he himself is oriented and thus integrated in the age in which he lives, is positively free in the actuality to which he belongs. But anyone can live poetically in this way. But the rare gift, the divine good fortune to be able to let what is poetically experienced take shape and form itself poetically, remains, of course, the enviable fate of the chosen few.”<sup>28</sup> Just how then is irony mastered? For Hegel, by submission to the concrete universal. For Kierkegaard the answer is more ambiguous: the emphasis is more on the individual. But with this turn to the individual we also turn to the abyss of freedom.

The conclusion of the dissertation has ominous undertones. Speaking of the dialectic of life, he remarks: “It takes courage not to surrender to the shrewd or sympathetic counsel of despair that allows a person to erase himself from the number of the living; but this does not necessarily mean that every sausage peddler, fed and fattened on self-confidence, has more courage than the person who succumbed to despair. It takes courage when sorrow would delude one, when it would reduce all joy to sadness, all longing to privation, every hope to recollection – it takes courage to will to be happy; but this does not necessarily mean that every full-grown adult infant with his sweet, sentimental smile, his joy-intoxicated eyes, has

---

26 *CI*, 326 / *SKS* 1, 354–355.

27 *CI*, 325 / *SKS* 1, 353.

28 *CI*, 326 / *SKS* 1, 354.

more courage than the person who yielded to grief and forgot to smile.”<sup>29</sup>  
Kierkegaard would seem to have lacked such courage.

---

<sup>29</sup> *CI*, 327 / *SKS* 1, 355.

## 2. Diapsalmata

### 1

Let me begin by returning to the structure of *Either/Or*. It is divided into two volumes, supposedly edited by the same person, Victor Eremita, but the two volumes are supposed to be the work of different authors, the first an unnamed aesthete about whom we learn very little, the second a magistrate at some court, Judge William. Each volume concludes with a section that the supposed authors, A and B, attribute to yet other persons: A thus does not claim to be the author of “The Seducer’s Diary,” while B does not claim to be the author of the sermon concluding volume II. We can thus distinguish four levels: Kierkegaard – Victor Eremita – A and B – The Seducer and the Author of the Sermon.

This raises the question: why does Kierkegaard use this approach? What is the advantage of using pseudonyms, and of course not only in *Either/Or* does Kierkegaard use a multiplicity of such pseudonyms. Surely not, as has sometimes been suggested, to hide the real author, although Kierkegaard himself tells us about how inventive he was in fooling people.<sup>30</sup> Nor are his various disclaimers likely to have misled people. Consider the following disclaimer published in *Fædrelandet*, after he had been identified as the author in another paper: “If I am not the author of these books, the rumor is a falsehood. However, if I am the author, then I am the only one authorized to say that.”<sup>31</sup> Only in 1846 did he acknowledge, in a postscript to the *Postscript*, that he was the author of the six pseudonymous works he had published in the meantime. But to hide the author’s real identity can hardly have been the main motive. Those interested knew almost immediately the identity of the author. Kierkegaard’s various disclaimers could hardly convince them otherwise.<sup>32</sup> In the “A First and Last Explanation,” which he appended to

---

30 Walter Lowrie *A Short Life*, p. 148.

31 *EOI*, “Historical Introduction,” p. xv.

32 Cf. also Jon Stewart’s *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, where Stewart points out that “one must constantly bear in mind that the use of pseudonyms andonyms was commonplace in Copenhagen in the first half of the nine-

the *Postscript*, he gives a much more convincing interpretation: “My pseudonymity or polyonymity has not had an *accidental* basis in my *person* (certainly not for fear of penalty under the law, in regard to which I am not aware of any offense, and simultaneously with the publication of a book the printer and the censor *qua* public official have always been officially informed who the author was) but an essential basis in the *production* itself, which, for the sake of the lines and of the psychologically varied differences of the individualities, poetically required an indiscriminateness with regard to good and evil, brokenheartedness and gaiety, despair and overconfidence, suffering and elation, etc., which is ideally limited only by psychological consistency, which no factually actual person dares to allow himself or can want to allow himself in the moral limitations of actuality. What has been written, then, is mine, but only insofar as I, by means of audible lines, have placed the life-view of the *creating*, poetically actual individuality in his mouth, for my relation is even more remote than that of a poet, who *poetizes* characters and yet in the preface is *himself* the *author*. That is, I am impersonally or personally in the third person a *souffleur* who has poetically produced the *authors*, whose *prefaces* in turn are their productions, as their *names* are also. Thus in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me. I have no opinion about them except as a third party, no knowledge of their meaning except as a reader, not the remotest private relation to them, since it is impossible to have that to a doubly reflected commu-

---

teenth century. Indeed, virtually every major writer used a pseudonym at one time or another, including thinkers as antithetical to Kierkegaard as Bishop Mynster. The reason for this was the small size of the intellectual community in Denmark, where the leading figures were all personally acquainted. Copenhagen was considered a market-town and not a cosmopolitan European capital on a par with Paris or Berlin. (...) As a result, the use of a pseudonym was simply a common precaution used to avoid embarrassment or unnecessary offense” (p. 42). Joakim Garff further suggests that the identity behind these pseudonyms was generally known to the public of the day, but that rules of social conduct prohibited explicit attribution (Joakim Garff *Søren Kierkegaard*, pp. 394–395). Garff in this connection quotes Meir Aaron Goldschmidt’s telling recollection of conversations with Kierkegaard: “He held strictly to anonymity. Just as I, of course, could neither know nor say that he was Frater Taciturnus, he was equally unwilling to admit any knowledge that I was connected with the editorship of *The Corsair*. We could talk about Frater Taciturnus, P. L. Møller, and *The Corsair* as though these were things that had absolutely nothing to do with us, and the fact that he sided with Frater Taciturnus and I took the other side had absolutely nothing to do with personal preferences” (p. 395).

nication.”<sup>33</sup> Kierkegaard goes on to insist more specifically that he is not the Seducer, nor the Judge, nor Victor Eremita.

The careful reader of *Either/Or* should indeed have been put on his guard by a remark in the Preface: “The last of A’s papers is a narrative titled ‘The Seducer’s Diary.’ Here we meet with new difficulties, inasmuch as A does not declare himself the author but only the editor. This is an old literary device to which I would not have much to object if it did not further complicate my own position, since one author becomes enclosed within the other like the boxes in a Chinese puzzle. This is not the place to explain in greater detail what confirms me in my view; I shall only point out that the prevailing mood in A’s preface somehow manifests the poet.”<sup>34</sup> Kierkegaard reminds us that it is an old literary device, popular especially among the German romantics. Victor Eremita, as we have seen, thinks A the author of the diary. The mood is said to be that of a poet. Soon we shall take a closer look at that mood.

Victor Eremita takes the diary to be a fiction. “It really seems as if A himself had become afraid of his fiction, which, like a troubled dream, continued to make him feel uneasy, also in his telling. If it was an actual event of which he had secret knowledge, then I find it strange that the preface carries no trace of A’s joy over seeing the realization of the idea he had often vaguely entertained.”<sup>35</sup> And he points out that the idea of such a seducer had already been suggested by A: “The idea of the seducer is suggested in the piece on the immediate erotic as well as in ‘Silhouettes’ – namely, that the counterpart to Don Giovanni must be a reflective seducer in the category of the interesting, where the issue therefore is not how many he seduces but how. I find no trace of such joy in the preface but indeed, as noted previously, a trepidation, a certain horror, that presumably has its basis in his poetic relation to this idea.”<sup>36</sup> And he then suggests that his own reaction to the diary is not so very different from A’s: “And A’s reaction does not surprise me, for I, too, who have nothing to do with this narrative – indeed, am twice removed from the original author – I, too, sometimes have felt quite strangely uneasy when I have been occupied with those papers in the stillness of the night.”<sup>37</sup> The pseudonyms then are fictions, personifications of possible

---

33 CUP, 625–626 / SKS 7, 569–570

34 EO1, 8–9 / SKS 2, 16.

35 EO1, 9 / SKS 2, 16.

36 EO1, 9 / SKS 2, 16–17.

37 EO1, 9 / SKS 2, 17.

life-styles that the author has entertained. They allow for an exploration of such a life-style, from within, as it were. But what such a pseudonym has to say should not be confused with what Kierkegaard has to say. It is an experimental way of writing that does not so much state a position as it explores possibilities. Neither A, nor B is Kierkegaard.

But the life-styles explored are more than mere possibilities. Why does the “Diary” terrify A? What is terrifying about the mode of life it represents? It would be merely interesting if it were only a thought experiment. But instead it explores a real possibility, a possibility A could imagine himself attempting to realize. More than that: what makes the “Diary” so frightening is that this may indeed present itself as the only mode of life open to a fully reflective individual. At the same time such a life is shown to be a failure, as we shall see in more detail later. Kierkegaard is wrestling here with a problem for which he had been prepared both by his own experience with Regine Olsen and by his philosophical training. Just because what he is writing about affects him so personally, he uses the device of the pseudonym to establish an artificial distance, not so much to protect his identity as author from others, but to protect himself from some of the possibilities he is writing about.

Another question must be asked here: why does Kierkegaard call the editor Victor Eremita? The word “Victor” suggests that he has conquered something. But just what has he conquered? The word “Eremita” suggests that unlike the Judge, the editor is a hermit of sorts.<sup>38</sup> What this suggests is that in this work Kierkegaard does not side with B against A, that B’s ethical life represents somehow the superior position. Victor Eremita’s position is in many ways closer to the loneliness of A, although now this is a loneliness that is in some sense victorious. We shall have to see in just what sense this victory is to be understood.

Before I turn to the “Diapsalmata,” another part of the preface deserves closer attention: its very beginning. “It may at times have occurred to you, dear reader, to doubt somewhat the accuracy of that familiar philosophical thesis that the outer is the inner and the inner is the outer. Perhaps you yourself have concealed a secret that in its joy or in its pain you felt was too intimate to share with others. Perhaps your life has put you in touch with people about whom you suspected that something of

---

38 For the meaning of “Victor Eremita,” cf. also *SKS* K2–3, 85, where it is translated as “den sejrende eneboer, den der sejrer i ensomhed” [“the conquering hermit, the one who conquers in solitude”].

this nature was the case, although neither by force nor by inveiglement were you able to bring out into the open that which was hidden. Perhaps neither case applies to you and your life, and yet you are not unacquainted with that doubt; like a fleeting shape it has drifted through your mind now and then.”<sup>39</sup> The footnote to the English translation gives you a reference to Hegel’s *Wissenschaft der Logik*.<sup>40</sup> It is indeed Hegel who is challenged here, and he is challenged by an appeal to an interiority that will not be sublated in a higher synthesis. Within himself each individual carries his own abyss that resists externalization. This of course raises questions of communication. Does authenticity, as Heidegger was to suggest in *Being and Time* (well aware that he had a precursor in Kierkegaard), so individuate us that in the end we are all radically alone.<sup>41</sup> And it is indeed such subjectivity and loneliness that colors the mood of the “Diapsalmata” to which I want to turn next.

## 2

Let me begin with what is said about these “Diapsalmata” in the Preface: “Besides the longer pieces, a number of scraps of paper were found on which were written aphorisms, lyrical utterances and reflections. The handwriting itself indicated that they belonged to A, and the contents confirmed this.”<sup>42</sup> We know that many of these aphorisms originated in journal entries. In this sense A would seem to be closer to Kierkegaard than B.

Victor Eremita also explains their placement in the volume and the title: “I have placed them first, because it seemed to me that they could be regarded as preliminary glimpses into what the longer pieces develop. I have called them Διαψάλλματα<sup>43</sup> and added as a kind of motto *ad se*

---

39 *EO1*, 3 / *SKS* 2, 11.

40 Cf. *EO1*, 603, n. 2. Cf. also *SKS* K2–3, 85–86, which provides the additional reference to J. L. Heiberg’s *Ledetraad ved Forelæsningerne over Philosophiens Philosophie* from 1832, §§ 112–115. This text has recently been translated into English as *Outline of the Philosophy of Philosophy or Speculative Logic*, pp. 37–213. In the same annotation, *SKS* K2–3 also points to A. P. Adler’s *Populaire Foredrag over Hegel’s objective Logik*, from 1842, as another referent for Eremita’s statement.

41 Martin Heidegger *Sein und Zeit*, pp. 316–324 / *Being and Time*, pp. 364–370.

42 *EO1*, 7 / *SKS* 2, 15.

43 The English translation silently corrects Kierkegaard’s spelling (“Διαψάλλματα”).

*ipsum* [to himself]. In a way, this title and this motto are by me and yet not by me. They are by me insofar as they are applied to the whole collection, but they belong to A himself, for the word Διαψάλματα<sup>44</sup> was written on one of the scraps of paper, and on two of them appear the words *ad se ipsum*. In keeping with what A himself has often done, I have also printed on the inside of the title page a short French poem found above one of these aphorisms. Inasmuch as the majority of the aphorisms have a lyrical form, I thought it appropriate to use the word Διαψάλματα<sup>45</sup> as the general title. If the reader considers this an unfortunate choice, I owe it to the truth to admit that it is my own idea and that the word was certainly used with discrimination by A himself for the aphorism over which it was found.”<sup>46</sup> Footnote 7 of the English translation tells us that Kierkegaard constructed the plural *Diapsalmata* from a word taken from the Greek translation of the psalms, where it stands for the Hebrew “Selah,” indicating a liturgical or musical pause, to mean something like lyrical aphorisms.<sup>47</sup> The motto *ad se ipsum*, taken from the Latin title of the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, also appears at the beginning of one of Kierkegaard’s journal notebooks, as footnote 8 tells you.<sup>48</sup>

The “Diapsalmata” cannot be readily systematized. Pervasive is a certain mood. I shall consider it more closely later. Most of the “Diapsalmata” speak of how unsatisfactory life is. There are sudden shifts. This lack of continuity is characteristic of the aesthetic life as a whole.

The aphorism was of course a favorite form of expression with the romantics. Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel produced famous collections of aphorisms.<sup>49</sup> Schlegel had argued against the philosophical system and

44 SKS 2 provides the singular “Διαψάλμα” (sic).

45 SKS 2 provides the singular “Διαψάλμα” (sic).

46 EO1, 8 / SKS 2, 15–16.

47 EO1, 7. Cf. also SKS K2–3, 87–88, where it is pointed out that Kierkegaard presumably understood διαψάλμα as designating “en liturgisk tilbagevendende tekst, et omkvæd, for i et forarbejde til *Diapsalmata* kaldes de ‘Omkvædene’” [“a liturgically recurring text, a refrain, for in a draft to *Diapsalmata* they are called ‘the refrains’”].

48 EO1, 604.

49 According to the auction-protocol of his personal library, Kierkegaard owned Friedrich Schlegel’s *Sämtliche Werke*, 10 vols., Vienna 1822–1825 (Ktl. 1816–1825), and Novalis’ *Schriften*, edited by Ludwig Tieck and Friedrich Schlegel, 4<sup>th</sup> enlarged edition, Berlin 1826 (Ktl. 1776). Kierkegaard also owned several works by Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, whose aphorisms might have constituted a more direct source for the “Diapsalmata.” The

systematic writing as fettering the freedom of the individual.<sup>50</sup> A truly free individual can assume different postures, put himself into different moods. There is thus a connection between the aphoristic style and Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms.

There would seem to be, however, a pervasive mood, a "Grundstimmung" that holds the "Diapsalmata" together: boredom, a sense of homelessness in the world, nihilism help to characterize this mood. For boredom consider the following: "I don't feel like doing anything. I don't feel like riding – the motion is too powerful; I don't feel like walking – it is too tiring; I don't feel like lying down, for either I would have to stay down, and I don't feel like doing that, or I would have to get up again, and I don't feel lie doing that either. *Summa Summarum*: I don't feel like doing anything."<sup>51</sup> For a sense of homelessness: "There are particular occasions when one may be most painfully moved to see a person standing utterly alone in the world. The other day I saw a poor girl walking utterly alone to church to be confirmed."<sup>52</sup> For a nihilistic preoccupation with self: "I say of my sorrow what the Englishman says of his house: My sorrow is *my castle*. Many people look upon having sorrow as one of life's conveniences."<sup>53</sup> "How empty and meaningless life is. – We bury a man; we accompany him to the grave, throw three spadefuls of earth on him; we ride out in a carriage, ride home in a carriage; we find consolation in the thought that we have a long life ahead of ourselves. But how long is seven times ten years? Why not settle it all at once, why not stay out there and go along down into the

---

books owned by Kierkegaard are, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg *Vermischte Schriften*, edited by L. C. Lichtenberg and F. Kries, 9 vols., Göttingen 1800–1806; *Ideen, Maximen und Einfälle. Nebst dessen Charakteristik*, edited by G. Jördens, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Leipzig 1830–1831; and *Auserlesene Schriften*. Baireuth 1800 (Ktl. 1764–1775). On Kierkegaard's relation to Lichtenberg, cf. Smail Rasic "Lichtenberg's Aphoristic Thought and Kierkegaard's Concept of the 'Subjective Existing Thinker.'" However, Rasic only briefly touches on Lichtenberg's possible influence on the "Diapsalmata" (cf. p. 212).

50 The interpretation of the early German Romantics as anti-systematic has also been put forward by e.g. Carl Schmitt *Politische Romantik*, and Isaiah Berlin *The Roots of Romanticism*. In Kierkegaard scholarship, this view of the German Romantics has been reaffirmed in particular by Sylvia Walsh in her study *Living Poetically*. For a recent challenge to this interpretation of the *Frühromantik*, cf. Frederick C. Beiser *The Romantic Imperative*.

51 *EO1*, 20 / *SKS* 2, 28.

52 *EO1*, 21 / *SKS* 2, 29.

53 *EO1*, 21 / *SKS* 2, 30.

grave and draw lots to whom will befall the misfortune of being the last of the living who throws the last three spadefuls of earth on the last of the dead?”<sup>54</sup> Significant is an entry from Kierkegaard’s journals reprinted on page 505 of the English translation. The entry gives special significance to the first diapsalma, which is said to state “really the task of the entire work, which is not resolved until the last words of the sermon. An enormous dissonance is assumed, and then it says: Explain it. A total break, with actuality is assumed, which does not have its base in futility but in mental depression and its predominance over actuality.” It also gives special significance to the last: “The last  $\delta\iota\alpha\psi$ . tells us how a life such as this has found its satisfactory expression in laughter. He pays his debt to actuality by means of laughter and now everything takes place within this contradiction.” Let us follow that hint and look at the first: “What is a poet? An unhappy person who conceals profound anguish in his heart but whose lips are so formed that as sighs and cries pass over them they sound like beautiful music. It is with him as with the poor wretches in Phalaris’ bronze bull, who were slowly tortured under a slow fire; their screams could not reach the tyrant’s ears to terrify him; to him they sounded like sweet music. And people crowd around the poet and say to him, ‘Sing again soon’ – in other words, may new sufferings torture your soul, and may your lips continue to be formed as before, because your screams would only alarm us, but the music is charming. And the reviewers step up and say, ‘That is right; so it must be according to the rules of aesthetics.’”<sup>55</sup> The beginning recalls what Victor Eremita had said about the inner and the outer in the Preface. So of course does the story of the bull. The reference to aesthetics invites a look at Lessing’s *Laocoön*.<sup>56</sup> According to Lessing, Laocoön cannot be shown screaming by the sculptor, because this would violate the demands of beauty. Later A will have more to say about the *Laocoön*.<sup>57</sup> And there may be a reference to Laocoön in the following: “I seem destined to have to suffer through all possible moods, to be required to have experiences of all kinds. At every mo-

---

54 *EO1*, 29 / *SKS* 2, 38.

55 *EO1*, 19 / *SKS* 2, 27.

56 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing *Laokoon oder Über die Grenzen der Malerey und Poesie*, published 1766; English translation, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Kierkegaard owned the complete works of Lessing: *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s sämtliche Schriften*, 32 vols., Berlin 1825–28 (Kt. 1747–1762).

57 *EO1*, 169 / *SKS* 2, 167.

ment I lie out in the middle of the ocean like a child who is supposed to learn how to swim. (I have learned this from the Greeks, from whom one can learn the purely human.) Admittedly, I have a swimming belt around my waist, but I do not see the support that is supposed to hold me up. It is an appalling way to gain experience.”<sup>58</sup> We also get a hint here concerning the mood that holds A’s productions together: a certain mood – A here likens himself a child who is supposed to learn how to swim and scream.

A gives a more precise description of this dominant mood in *EO1*, 28 / *SKS* 2, 37: “My life’s achievement amounts to nothing at all, a mood, a single color. My achievement resembles the painting by that artist who was supposed to paint the Israelites’ crossing of the Red Sea and to that end painted the entire wall red and explained that the Israelites had walked across and that the Egyptians were drowned.” How are we to understand this: the Israelites had walked across and the Egyptians were drowned?

But let me turn now to the last diapsalma: “Something marvelous has happened to me. I was transported to the seventh heaven. There sat all the gods assembled. As a special dispensation I was granted the favor of making a wish. ‘What do you want,’ asked Mercury, ‘Do you want youth, or beauty, or power, or a long life, or the most beautiful girl, or any of the other glorious things we have in the treasure chest? Choose – but only one thing.’ For a moment I was bewildered; then I addressed the gods, saying: ‘My esteemed contemporaries. I choose one thing – that I may always have the laughter on my side.’ Not one of the gods said a word; instead all of them began to laugh. From that I concluded that my wish was granted and decided that the gods know how to express themselves with good taste, for it would indeed have been inappropriate to reply solemnly: It is granted to you.”<sup>59</sup> The conclusion brings to mind *EO1*, 21 / *SKS* 2, 29: “It is a cause for alarm to note with what hypochondriac profundity Englishmen of an earlier generation have spotted the ambiguity basic to laughter. Thus Dr. Hartley has observed: that when laughter first makes its appearance to the child, it is as a nascent cry that is excited by pain or a suddenly arrested feeling of pain, repeated at very short intervals. What if everything in the world were a misunderstanding: what if laughter really were weeping!”

---

58 *EO1*, 31–32 / *SKS* 2, 40–41.

59 *EO1*, 42–43 / *SKS* 2, 51–52.

Recall Kierkegaard's understanding of romantic irony. Irony is linked to an awakening of freedom, of the infinite in us. It is that freedom that cannot find its home in the world. The talk of anguish and beauty of the first diapsalma should be compared to the sublime laughter of the last. If there is one mood that pervades the "Diapsalmata" as a whole it is this sense of homelessness, of being a stranger in the world. Is this a personal mood, a mood that has its origin in a personal history? Or does it have its foundation in a historical development that let the human being fall out of reality? Or is it the human condition? Or is it all three?

Last time I pointed out that Kierkegaard had written his *Concept of Irony* as a critique of romanticism that followed Hegel quite closely. Romantic irony is criticized for its negativity. The finite is negated in order to liberate us from the hold it has on us. Thus the ironist criticizes the establishment, criticizes the accepted standard of morality, of life in general, not for the sake of reform, but for the sake of freedom. In the world of which he is a part he feels nailed down: "I feel as a chessman must feel when the opponent says of it: That piece cannot be moved."<sup>60</sup> Dostoevsky's "Man from the Underground" comes to mind, who feels nailed down by  $2+2=4$  and dreams of  $2+2=5$ .<sup>61</sup>

The romantic ironists Kierkegaard attacked in the *Concept of Irony* had no interest in constructing something; they just demanded freedom, a freedom that made room for the imagination and acknowledges no rules.<sup>62</sup> The ironist looks at what the world has to offer him as material that he can play with as he sees fit. That such an ironist would have difficulty with marriage is evident. It becomes a paradigm of the way social institutions fetter us. And yet the ironist dreams of marriage, even as he is afraid of it. Consider the beginning of the "Ecstatic Lecture": "Marry and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Whether you marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way."<sup>63</sup> Or: "Girls do no appeal to me. Their beauty passes away like yesterday when it is past. Their faithfulness – yes, their faithfulness! Either they are faithless – this does not con-

---

60 EO1, 22 / SKS 2, 30.

61 Fyodor Dostoevsky *Notes from Underground*, p. 24. Interestingly, Judge William in volume two of *Either/Or* characterizes A's aesthetic position in similar terms, as "a compromise like making five an even number" (EO2, 166 / SKS 3, 163).

62 On Kierkegaard's critique of Romantic imagination in *The Concept of Irony*, cf. David J. Gouwens *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of the Imagination*, pp. 45–93.

63 EO1, 38 / SKS 2, 47.

cern me any more – or they are faithful. If I found such a one, she would appeal to me from the standpoint of her being a rarity; but from the standpoint of a long period of time she would not appeal to me, for either she would continually remain faithful, and then I would become a sacrifice to my eagerness for experience, since I would have to bear with her, or the time would come when she would lapse, and then I would have the same old story.”<sup>64</sup> What would appeal to him? A beauty that would not fade away! But what would that mean: a beauty divorced from love and life? We should note the connection between the satisfaction A sometimes dreams of and death. There is indeed an obvious connection: “There are, as is known insects that die in the moment of fertilization. So it is with all joy: life’s highest, most splendid moment of enjoyment is accompanied by death.”<sup>65</sup>

Revealing about A’s inability to take his place in the world is the following: “I have, I believe, the courage to doubt everything. I have, I believe, the courage to fight against everything, but I do not have the courage to acknowledge anything, the courage to possess, to own, anything. Most people complain that the world is so prosaic that things do not go in life as in the novel where opportunity is always so favorable. I complain that in life it is not as in the novel, where one has hardhearted fathers and nisses and trolls to battle, and enchanted princesses to free. What are all such adversaries together compared with the pale, bloodless, tenacious-of-life-nocturnal forms with which I battle and to which I myself give life and existence.”<sup>66</sup> A shares Schlegel’s concern that love is domesticated by marriage, made dull and useful, as unerotic as possible.<sup>67</sup> That this ought to be attacked, he would admit. He even shows sympathy with naive, immediate enjoyment, only he believes that centuries of Christianity had made such enjoyment impossible.

Consider: “Real enjoyment consists not in what one enjoys but in the idea. If I had in my service a submissive jinni who, when I asked for a glass of water, would brig me the world’s most expensive wines, de-

---

64 *EO1*, 29 / *SKS* 2, 38.

65 *EO1*, 20 / *SKS* 2, 28.

66 *EO1*, 23 / *SKS* 2, 32.

67 Cf. e. g. Schlegel’s novel *Lucinde*, where he notoriously celebrates the extramarital relation between Julius and Lucinde (cf. esp. *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, vol. 5, pp. 61–62).

liciously blended in a goblet, I would dismiss him until he learned that the enjoyment consists not in what I enjoy but I getting my own way.”<sup>68</sup> A wants to get his own way. Note the divorce here of freedom and the immediacy of enjoyment.

Here is what A has to say about the innocent pleasures of life: “And now the innocent pleasures of life. It must be granted to them that they have only one flaw – that they are so innocent.”<sup>69</sup> A knows about the way reflection cuts him off from really living: “*Aladdin* [a play by Adam Gottlob Oehlenschläger] is so very refreshing because this piece has the audacity of the child, of the genius, in the wildest wishes. Indeed how many are there in our day who truly dare to wish, dare to desire, dare to address nature neither with a polite child’s *bitte*, *bitte*, nor with the raging frenzy of one damned?...is not every magnificent demanding eventually diminished to morbid reflecting over the I, from insisting to informing, which we are indeed brought up and trained to do.”<sup>70</sup>

A, we can say, is dreaming of Don Juan, of a less reflective way of existing. “The tremendous poetical power of folk literature is manifest, among other ways, in its power to desire. In comparison, desire in our age is simultaneously sinful and boring, because it desires what belongs to the neighbor.”<sup>71</sup> But, as Schlegel knew, such innocence lies behind us. We moderns want to break the law, not because we desire what is illegal, but in order to break the law. The knowledge that we are breaking the law makes the transgression more interesting to us, gives it a special kick.<sup>72</sup>

Let me conclude with A’s “Tested Advice for Authors”: “One carelessly writes down one’s personal observations, has them printed, and in the various proofs one will eventually acquire a number of good ideas. Therefore, take courage, you who have not yet dared to have something printed. Do not despise typographical errors, and to become witty by means of typographical errors may be considered a legitimate way to become witty.”<sup>73</sup> In Australia nonsense verse was published quite some time ago as the *opus postumum* of a miner and admired for

---

68 EO1, 31 / SKS 2, 40.

69 EO1, 25 / SKS 2, 34.

70 EO1, 22 / SKS 2, 30.

71 EO1, 22 / SKS 2, 31.

72 Cf. Friedrich Schlegel *Über das Studium der Griechischen Poesie*, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, vol. 1, pp. 217–276.

73 EO1, 20 / SKS 2, 28.

its hermetic profundity.<sup>74</sup> A misprint in an edition of Yeats' poems, which in "Among School Children" had "soldier" Aristotle instead of "solider" Aristotle,<sup>75</sup> led some young poet to wonder about the profundity of this "soldier Aristotle." In this connection I recommend to you Jean Paul Richter's *Vorschule der Aesthetik*, more especially the section entitled "Poetic Nihilists,"<sup>76</sup> where Richter criticizes his contemporaries for their attempts to liberate the subject by destroying reality and replacing it with poetic constructions, projected into the void. This opens up a discussion of the relationship of art to reality in modern art, and more generally in art.

---

74 Hugo Friedrich *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik*, p. 133; cf. also Karsten Harries *The Meaning of Modern Art*, pp. 61–67.

75 Stanza VI: "Plato thought nature but a spume that plays / Upon a ghostly paradigm of things; / Solider Aristotle played the taws / Upon the bottom of a king of kings" (W. B. Yeats "Among School Children," *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, p. 217). The misprint was not corrected until 1947, eight years after Yeats' death.

76 Jean Paul *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, pp. 31–34. Kierkegaard owned the second edition of the *Vorschule der Aesthetik* from 1831 (Ktl. 1381–1383). Kierkegaard's relation to Jean Paul is still a largely unexplored area of research; for a recent study, cf. Markus Kleinert "Apparent and Hidden Relations between Kierkegaard and Jean Paul," esp. p. 166 for the concept of "poetic nihilism."

### 3. Immediacy and Reflection

#### 1

The “Diapsalmata” set the mood for what is to come. What follows is a long essay, “The Immediate Stages of the Erotic or the Musical Erotic,” followed in turn by a number of shorter pieces. The first volume ends with a seemingly very personal diary. Obvious is the change of style between the first essay and the final diary: consider the changing relationship of the fictional author to the discourse: as far as the form is concerned we have a movement from the relatively impersonal to the very personal, from distance to involvement, from the abstract to the concrete.

But this movement is balanced by another. The first essay discusses *Don Giovanni* as an embodiment of sensuality. As such he is not at all reflective. The idea of sensuality is of course itself a rather abstract idea. The Seducer, on the other hand, presents himself to us as a highly reflective individual. As far as the subject matter is concerned we have thus a movement from immediacy to reflection. The two movements seem to be inverse movements.<sup>77</sup>

---

77 The question of the overall structure of the first volume of *Either/Or* has received little critical attention in the secondary literature. Leaving aside the “Diapsalmata” in his analysis, John E. Hare has nevertheless noted four additional features in this regard: 1) “the two outer sections [“The Immediate Erotic Stages” and “The Seducer’s Diary”] balance each other. They are the longest (by far) and they are both about seducers called John (Don Giovanni and Johannes)”; 2) “the sections have a definite pattern of lengths: 92, 28, 52, 14, 50, 20, 144 (or 132 for the diary itself). The general pattern is an alternation of shorter and longer, but within this there is a more specific and symmetrical shape: long, short, intermediate, shortest, intermediate, short, long. The volume thus has an arch structure, like those Bach cantatas with large opening and closing choruses, and an odd number of inner movements symmetrically arranged to emphasize the middle movement”; 3) “the outer long sections and the middle shortest section are in their main subject about males, and the other sections are about females or (in the case of the sixth section) not about individuals at all”; and 4) “there is a loss of pathos between the three sections preceding *The Unhappiest One* and the three succeeding sections. Don Giovanni cuts a noble figure, challenging fate and losing. (...) Johannes the Seducer, on the other hand, is a mean figure, pathetic in the dismissive sense.”

## 2

But let me turn to “The Immediate Stages of the Erotic,” a long essay centering on Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*. In that essay A, with mock seriousness, attempts to establish two things: 1) That Mozart “joins that little immortal band of men whose names, whose works, time will not forget because eternity recollects them”<sup>78</sup> – a statement that reminds me of the very end of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, where Hegel speaks of “die begriffene Geschichte,” as the “Erinnerung und die Schädelstätte des absoluten Geistes, die Wirklichkeit, Wahrheit und Gewissheit seines Throns, ohne den er das leblose Einsame wäre; nur – / aus dem Kelche dieses Geisterreiches / schäumt ihm seine Unendlichkeit.”<sup>79</sup> Mozart belongs to this spirit realm. 2) That in that group he deserves first place.<sup>80</sup> To support what, as he himself points out, many will find a “childish” claim, he sketches in the introductory discussion a theory of what it is that makes a work of art a classic and then goes on to situate music in this context and to point out what is special about it. This A ties to its content, which he asserts is sensuality. This in turn leads to the claim that it was Christianity that brought sensuality into the world.<sup>81</sup> The introduction to this essay closes with some remarks on the stages of the immediate erotic.

The main body of the essay then discusses these three stages by considering Cherubino in the *Marriage of Figaro*, Papageno in the *Magic Flute*, and Don Giovanni as artistic embodiments of these stages. I shall turn to these next time.

---

Hare nevertheless draws a different conclusion from the one presented here, claiming that “The second volume is an argument, with a sustained development and a conclusion; whereas the first volume is a static set of moments, like beads on a necklace, and there is no overall development of thought that advances the reader from the initial section to the close” (John E. Hare “The Unhappiest One and the Structure of Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*,” pp. 92–94).

78 *EO1*, 48 / *SKS* 2, 55.

79 G. W. F. Hegel *Phänomenologie des Geistes, Werke*, vol. 3, p. 591. The end of the quotation is a variation on Schiller’s poem “Freundschaft.”

80 *EO1*, 49 / *SKS* 2, 57.

81 *EO1*, 61 / *SKS* 2, 68.

## 3

Let me return now to the essay's very beginning: "From the moment my soul was first astounded by Mozart's music and humbly bowed in admiration, it has often been a favorite and refreshing occupation of me to deliberate on the way that happy Greek view of the world that calls the world κόσμος [cosmos]<sup>82</sup> because it manifests itself as a well-organized whole, as an elegant, transparent adornment for the spirit that ever acts upon and operates throughout it, the way that happy view lets itself be repeated in a higher order of things, in the world of ideals, the way there is here again a ruling wisdom especially wonderful at uniting what belongs together, Axel with Valborg, Homer with the Trojan War, Raphael with Catholicism, Mozart with Don Juan."<sup>83</sup> To look at the world as a cosmos is to look at it as a well organized whole, in which every part is just as it should be. Leibniz is still able to look at the world as such a perfect whole.<sup>84</sup> With Baumgarten this understanding of the cosmos as a perfect whole migrates to the beautiful: a successful work of art should be such a cosmos.<sup>85</sup> A finds it refreshing to think of such a view of the world. He obviously does not think that it reflects the

---

82 The English translation silently corrects Kierkegaard's spelling ("κόσμος").

83 *EO1*, 47 / *SKS 2*, 55.

84 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz *Monadology*. Kierkegaard owned the *Theodicee*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, edited by Johann Christoph Gottsched, Hannover & Leipzig 1763, as well as the J. E. Erdman edition of Leibniz' works, *Guil. Leibnitii opera philosophica quæ exstant*, 2 vols., Berlin 1840 (Kil. 619–620), which includes the *Monadology*. The relationship between Kierkegaard and Leibniz has nevertheless received only minor scholarly attention. Cf. esp. Ronald Grimsley's useful article "Kierkegaard and Leibniz," which traces and analyzes Kierkegaard's various references to Leibniz. As Grimsley also notes, Kierkegaard seems to have studied Leibniz closely for the first time while completing work on *Either/Or* (pp. 383–384).

85 Cf. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten *Reflections on Poetry*, § 68, pp. 62–63 and § 71, p. 64. The auction-catalogue over Kierkegaard's library does not indicate that he owned any books by Baumgarten, although a reference to the *Reflections on Poetry* (*De nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus*) is found in a journal entry from November, 1842, during the time he was completing work on *Either/Or* (*Pap. IV C 103*). That *Either/Or* works with a conception of beauty derived from the tradition of aesthetics inaugurated by Baumgarten is also clear from Judge William's definition of "the beautiful as that which has its teleology within itself" (*EO2*, 272 / *SKS 3*, 259). Cf. also Karsten Harries *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, pp. 21–22.

way things really are. We experience the Greek understanding of the cosmos as a beautiful fiction.

A lifts that understanding to a higher plane, not to the work of art, but to the realm of ideals. No doubt Hegel, who, I am tempted to say, looks at “die begriffene Geschichte” in that way, figures in the background.

It is an odd set of examples that follows, especially odd for us is the first: *Axel and Valborg* is the title of a romantic play by Oehlenschläger: in Kierkegaard’s Denmark they had become the fictional embodiment of two noble lovers – the paradigm of that wonderful perfection that is said to refresh us when two lovers find each other, returning to the plenitude of Aristophanes’ circle men in Plato’s *Symposium*.<sup>86</sup> But what is the analogy between what draws the two lovers together and the relation of an artist to his subject matter? Is it that in all these cases the power that makes these pairings seem right is the poetic imagination?

The view presented here is of course easily dismissed: “There is a paltry disbelief that seems to contain considerable healing power. It thinks that such a connection is accidental and sees nothing more in it than a very fortunate conjunction of the various forces in the game of life. It thinks that it is accidental that the lovers find each other, accidental that they love each other. There might have been a hundred other girls with whom he could have been just as happy, whom he could have loved just as much. It considers that many a poet has lived who would have been just as immortal as Homer if that glorious subject matter had not been taken over by him, many a composer who would have been just as immortal as Mozart if the opportunity had offered itself. This wisdom contains considerable consolation and balm for all mediocrities, who thereby see themselves in a position to delude themselves and like-minded people into thinking that they did not become as exceptional as the exceptional ones because of a mistaken identifica-

---

86 Cf. Plato *Symposium*, 189d–191a. Johannes the Seducer picks up on Aristophanes’ myth in a letter to Cordelia towards the end of “The Seducer’s Diary”: “As you know, there once lived a race upon the earth who were human beings, to be sure, but who were self-sufficient and did not know the intensely fervent union of erotic love [*Elskov*]. Yet they were powerful, so powerful that they wanted to assault heaven. Jupiter feared them and divided them in such a way that one became two, a man and a woman” (*EO1*, 443 / *SKS* 2, 430).

tion on the part of fate, a mistake on the part of the world.”<sup>87</sup> Isn’t it just an accident that leads the lovers together, that lets a Homer find the right theme? A to be sure rejects such a view: “But it is abhorrent of course, to every high-minded soul, every optimate, to whom it is not as important to rescue himself in such a paltry manner as to lose himself by contemplating greatness; whereas it is a delight to his soul, a sacred joy, to see united what belongs together. This is good fortune, not in the sense of the accidental, and thus presupposes two factors, whereas the accidental consists in the unarticulated interjections of fate. This is good fortune in history, the divine interplay of the historic forces, the festival period of the historic epoch. The accidental has only one factor. It is accidental that Homer, in the history of the Trojan War, acquired the most remarkable epic subject matter imaginable. Good fortune has two factors: It is fortunate that this most remarkable epic subject matter came into the hands of Homer. Here the emphasis is just as much on Homer as on the subject matter. Here is the deep harmony that pervades every production we call classic. So also with Mozart. It is fortunate that the perhaps sole musical theme (in the most profound sense) was given to – Mozart.”<sup>88</sup> As already mentioned, just as Leibniz’s *Monadology* invites us to look at the world as a cosmos, Hegel’s philosophy invites us to look at history as forming such a whole, presided over and held together by his Absolute. And just as the *Monadology* can be looked at as profoundly aesthetic production, so can Hegel’s philosophy of history, so indeed can his entire philosophical production.

## 4

But let me return to page forty-eight of the English translation: “With his Don Giovanni, Mozart joins that little immortal band of men whose names, whose works, time will not forget because eternity recollects them.”<sup>89</sup> “Yet, I certainly need not fear that any age will deny him a place in that kingdom of the gods, but I do need to be prepared for people to find it childish of me to insist that he have first place.”<sup>90</sup> *Don Giovanni* is said to be a classical work. What then makes something such a

---

87 *EO1*, 47 / *SKS 2*, 55.

88 *EO1*, 47–48 / *SKS 2*, 55–56.

89 *EO1*, 48 / *SKS 2*, 56.

90 *EO1*, 49 / *SKS 2*, 57.

work? A's discussion is indebted to Hegel, who distinguished between three stages of art history, the symbolic, the classical, and the romantic.<sup>91</sup> A would appear to be in agreement with Hegel's understanding of the classic: "In a classic work, good fortune – that which makes it classic and immortal – is the absolute correlation of the two forces. This correlation is so absolute that a subsequent reflective age will scarcely be able, even in thought, to separate that which is intrinsically conjoined without running the danger of causing or fostering a misunderstanding."<sup>92</sup> What are "the two forces"? Consider once more this already cited passage: "Good fortune has two factors: It is fortunate that this most remarkable epic subject matter came into the hands of Homer. Here the emphasis is just as much on Homer as on the subject matter. Here is the deep harmony that pervades every production we call classic."<sup>93</sup> A proceeds to advance an understanding of art that places equal weight on form and content. He thus opposes to a formalist approach to art another that, appealing to Hegel, gives greater weight to content. "There was a school of estheticians who, because of a one-sided emphasis on form, were not without guilt in occasioning the diametrically opposite misunderstanding. It has often struck me that these estheticians were as a matter of fact attached to Hegelian philosophy, inasmuch as both a general knowledge of Hegel and a special knowledge of his esthetics give assurance that he strongly emphasizes, especially with regard to the esthetic, the importance of the subject matter."<sup>94</sup> Both are considered inadequate. A formalist approach may well seem to be demanded by the discussion of beauty found in Baumgarten and his followers (sensible perfection)<sup>95</sup> and then again in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (purposiveness

---

91 Cf. G. W. F. Hegel *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik, Werke*, vols. 13–15, Part Two, "Entwicklung des Ideals zu den Besonderen Formen des Kunstschönen." Kierkegaard's journals make clear that he was reading Hegel's lectures on aesthetics already in 1841 and 1842 (cf. *JP* 2:1592–1593 / *SKS* 19, 245–246; *JP* 5:5545 / *SKS* 19, 285–286), and he goes on to quote from them directly later on in this same volume (*EO1*, 147 / *SKS* 2, 147).

92 *EO1*, 49 / *SKS* 2, 57. The influence of Hegel on A's conception of a classical work has been examined by Jon Stewart, who also points to Heiberg's mediating role in this respect (Jon Stewart *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, pp. 209–218).

93 *EO1*, 48 / *SKS* 2, 56.

94 *EO1*, 50 / *SKS* 2, 58.

95 Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten *Reflections on Poetry*, §§ 7–8, p. 39; and *Metaphysica*, §§ 73–74.

without a purpose).<sup>96</sup> Much more recently Clement Greenberg has embraced such a formalism, insisting that Kant's *Critique of Judgment* has given us the outline of an aesthetics still valid for the present, where by now this judgment has been overtaken by the development of art.<sup>97</sup> A's comments retain their relevance: "In fact the estheticians who one-sidedly stressed the poetic activity have broadened this concept so much that this pantheon became adorned, indeed overdecorated, to such a degree with classic knickknacks and bagatelles that the unsophisticated notion of a cool hall with a few particular great figures utterly vanished, and instead that pantheon became a storage attic. According to this esthetic view, every artistically skillful little dainty is a classic work that is assured of absolute immortality; indeed, in this kind of hocus-pocus such trifles are admitted first of all. Although paradoxes are otherwise detested, the paradox that the least was actually art was not dismaying. The untruth was in a one-sided emphasis on the formal activity. Therefore such an esthetic view could last only for a certain period, that is, so long as there was no awareness that time mocked it and its classic works. In the realm of esthetics, this view was a form of the radicalism that has similarly manifested itself in so many spheres; it was an expression of the unbridled producing individual in is equally unbridled lacks of substance."<sup>98</sup> The formalist approach, A insists, has to lead to the celebration of works of art that lack substance. Hegel is praised for having reinstated the subject matter: "Hegel reinstated the subject matter, the idea, in its rights and thereby ousted those transient classic works, those superficialities, those twilight moths from the arched vaults of classicism."<sup>99</sup> "What these productions lacked was ideas, and the more formally perfect they were, the more quickly they burned themselves out. As technical skill was more and more developed to the highest level of virtuosity, the more transient this virtuosity became and the more it lacked the mettle and power or balance to withstand the gusts of

---

96 Cf. the "Third Moment" of Kant's *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, *Werke*, vol. 5, pp. 220–236.

97 "Kant," Clement Greenberg writes, "had bad taste and relatively meager experience of art, yet his capacity for abstraction enabled him, despite many gaffes, to establish in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* what is the most satisfactory basis for aesthetics we yet have. Kant asked how art in general worked" (Clement Greenberg "Review of Piero della Francesca and The Arch of Constantine, both by Bernard Berenson," *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, p. 249).

98 *EO1*, 53 / *SKS 2*, 60.

99 *EO1*, 53 / *SKS 2*, 61.

time, while more and more exalted it continually made greater claims to being the most distilled spirit. Only where the idea is brought to rest and transparency in a distilled form can there be any question of a classic work, but then it will also be capable of withstanding the times.”<sup>100</sup> To be sure, a one-sided emphasis on content is also suspect in that it renders art in the end superfluous. In the 18th century art thus found itself caught between these two extremes: rococo vs. neo-classicism, which with its emphasis on ideas anticipated the concept art of today. The same problem seen by A continues to be a problem today.

Given his idea of the classic work as perfectly incarnating its content, A's attempt to argue for the unique greatness of *Don Giovanni* seems wrongheaded, as he himself points out. “All classic productions rank equally high, as previously noted, because each one ranks infinitely high. Consequently if one nevertheless wants to introduce a certain order into this series, it stands to reason that it cannot be based on anything essential. For that would mean that there was an essential difference, and that in turn would mean that the word ‘classic’ was wrongly predicated of all of them.”<sup>101</sup> To say that each classic production ranks infinitely high is to say that confronted with great works of art comparisons are odious. Consider, e. g., the question: is *Don Giovanni* a greater work than Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*? A in fact does not take his discussion at all seriously. It is written, he says, only for those who are in love. And A clearly loves Mozart. “But I shall give up this whole exploration. It is written only for those who have fallen in love. And just as it does not take much to make children happy, so it is, as is well known, that the love enraptured often rejoice in very odd things. It is like a vehement lover's quarrel over nothing, and yet it has its value – for the lovers.”<sup>102</sup> A, I said, is in love with Mozart, or more specifically, with his *Don Giovanni*. This is perhaps the only example of an experience of genuine love in his life that we are given in this work. That it is love of a work of art and not of a person is significant. But the work of art is understood as an incarnation of spirit in the concrete and particular. Love is tied to an experience of such incarnation.

The lover will want to insist on the uniqueness of the beloved. The fact that the meeting of the two was objectively a mere accident does not count against this. But this objective truth does not invalidate the

---

100 *EO1*, 54 / *SKS 2*, 61.

101 *EO1*, 51 / *SKS 2*, 59.

102 *EO1*, 57–58 / *SKS 2*, 65.

subjective truth that the lovers were meant to meet. In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard will spell out in detail just how significant this distinction is.

A's playful tone should thus not lead us to quickly pass over what he has to say. Quite a number of the points he makes deserve our serious attention. Consider the argument A advances to support his claim: "I believe, however, that the following observations will open the prospect for a division that will have validity precisely because it is completely accidental. The more abstract and thus the more impoverished the idea is, the more abstract and the more impoverished the medium is: hence the greater is the probability that no repetition can be imagined, and the greater is the probability that when the idea has acquired its expression it has acquired it once and for all. On the other hand, the more concrete and thus the richer the idea and likewise the medium, the greater is the probability of a repetition. As I now place the various classic works side by side and, without wishing to rank them, am amazed that all stand equally high, it nevertheless will be apparent that one section has more works than another, or, if it does not, that there is the possibility that it can have, whereas any possibility for the other is not so readily apparent."<sup>103</sup> Consider once more the contrast between Don Giovanni and the Seducer. The story of the seducer could have taken countless forms. This indeed suggested by the vignette that A tells us was placed on the manuscript, which bore the words: "*commentarius prepetuus no. 4.*"<sup>104</sup> I shall have to return the significance of that vignette. Clear is that the "Diary" is presented to us as a member of a set. But, A insists, once Mozart wrote his *Don Giovanni* the idea had found such an adequate expression that repetition forbade itself. Can we make an analogous point about, say, one of Malevich's suprematist compositions? The very abstractness of the idea discourages repetition. And yet there is a difference. The incarnation of the idea does not possess the same necessity.

So far A has simply taken for granted and said little to support his claim that the opera is indeed, not only a classic, but supreme among all classic works. To attempt to do so is indeed rather odd, as he remarks. "To demonstrate that *Don Giovanni* is a classic work in the strictest sense is a task for reflection, but the other endeavor is completely irrelevant to the proper domain of reflection. The movement of thought is calmed

---

103 *EO1*, 54–55 / *SKS 2*, 62.

104 *EO1*, 303 / *SKS 2*, 293.

by having recognized that it is a classic work and that every classic production is equally perfect; to thinking, anything more one wants to do is suspect.”<sup>105</sup>

## 5

What then is Mozart’s theme: sensuality. And sensuality was brought into the world by Christianity, A insists, where his reasoning is quite Hegelian. “To make the claim that Christianity brought sensuality into the world seems boldly venturesome. But as they say: Boldly ventured is half won. So it also holds here; it will become evident upon reflection that in the positing of something, the other that is excluded is indirectly posited. Since sensuality is generally that which is to be negated, it really comes to light, is really posited, first by the act that excludes it through a positing of the opposite positive.”<sup>106</sup> Christianity, according to A, brought sensuality into the world by excluding it, by insisting that what should matter about human beings was the spirit, not the body, which rendered especially the erotic sphere something to be negated, to be fought against. “But if the thesis that Christianity has brought sensuality into the world is to be understood properly, it must be comprehended as identical to its opposite, that it is Christianity that has driven sensuality out of the world, has excluded sensuality from the world...I could add one more qualification that perhaps most emphatically shows what I mean: sensuality was placed under the qualification of spirit first by Christianity. This is quite natural, for Christianity is spirit, and spirit is the positive principle it has brought into the world. But when sensuality is viewed under the qualification of spirit, its significance is seen to be that it is to be excluded, but precisely because it is to be excluded it is defined as a principle, as a power, for that which spirit, which is itself a principle, is supposed to exclude must be something that manifests itself as a principle, even though it does not manifest itself as a principle until the moment when it is excluded.”<sup>107</sup> The body does make its claims on us. No Christian could deny this. But claims that should not be given into are temptations. Rivaling the accepted ideal of a spiritual life, another thus appeared, a counter-ideal, the ideal of a life of sensuality.

---

105 *EO1*, 58 / *SKS 2*, 65.

106 *EO1*, 61 / *SKS 2*, 68.

107 *Ibid.*

This counter-ideal is associated with the devil, who may be understood as the Christian transformation of the god Dionysus. The fact that sin should so often beckon us, should have a seductive power, is a reminder of the one-sidedness of the accepted ideal. Just by excluding the sensual, Christianity brought it into the world, posited it as a force. With the Greeks sensuality was still joined to the spirit. Christianity cut this bond.

To be sure, A is offering us another caricature: such idealization of the spirit should not be identified with Christianity. It goes back at least to Plato, and it has remained in force even when Christianity was no longer believed. Sartre thus can be said to have idealized the spirit and as a result to have downgraded the body and the sensual.<sup>108</sup> To a considerable extent such an attitude still governs our common sense.

But note also that another image of the human being has emerged or is still emerging to challenge the former: one only has to think of Darwin or Freud. Both, if often misunderstood, have done their share to shake our belief in the traditional conception of human being, one by suggesting that we are created in the image of the monkey rather than that of God, the other by seeming to give priority to the unconscious. Such concepts as subject, reason, spirit, not only no longer seem to exhaust the being of man, but there is a widespread feeling that they are not even capable of pointing to what is essential.

For some time now there have been attempts to develop a different view of man, a new philosophical anthropology that would bring out into the open what the tradition had left unsaid. Foundations for such an attempt were laid by Kierkegaard's older contemporary and Hegel's antipode, Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer denied that we are first of all thinking beings. First of all we are desiring beings, not disembodied spirit, but will, and we discover ourselves to be will by discovering ourselves to be body – where sexual desire provides a ready paradigm. It is no accident that Schopenhauer was the first major philosopher to give music first place among all the arts.<sup>109</sup> For Schopenhauer music is the language of the will, although “language,” it would seem, here can only be a metaphor. For A music is the “language” of sensuality. The two conceptions of music invite comparison.<sup>110</sup>

---

108 Jean-Paul Sartre *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 561–566.

109 Cf. Arthur Schopenhauer *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, *Werke*, vol. 1, § 52, pp. 338–353, and vol. 2, chapter 39, pp. 520–532.

110 Kierkegaard owned several of Schopenhauer's works, including *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* and *Parerga und Paralipomena* (cf. Ktl. 772–775; 944).

A is right to insist that modernity's turn to sensuality cannot be considered a return to a Greek attitude: "Consequently, the sensual certainly did exist in the world before, but it was not qualified spiritually. How then, did it exist? It was qualified psychically. This was its nature in paganism, and if one wants to look for its most perfect expression, it was in Greece. But the sensual psychically qualified is not contrast or exclusion, but harmony and consonance. But precisely because the sensual is posited as harmoniously qualified, it is posited not as a principle, but as a consonant *encliticon* [article or pronoun]." <sup>111</sup> A goes on to place sensuality in the context of a Hegelian history of spirit.

This is of course once more a caricature. One might, e. g., wonder what place A would assign to Helen in his narrative. How would he read the *Symposium*, a text that, I would argue, is haunted by Helen? What does she embody? The sensual psychically qualified? What would A make of Plato and Xenophon's two Aphrodites? <sup>112</sup>

But A's understanding of the Greeks is very much in line with the then prevailing view. And his claim that it was Christianity that brought sensuality into the world is in the spirit of Hegel, although we may ask whether here there is still a promise of a higher synthesis.

## 6

This much then about the idea of the sensuous erotic. A turns next to the most suitable medium for its expression. That medium, he claims, is music.

A does not claim to be an expert. Quite the opposite: he stands outside music, is a mere observer. <sup>113</sup> The kingdom in which he feels at

---

However, as Simonella Davini has recently pointed out, Kierkegaard does not mention Schopenhauer in any of his writings or notes prior to 1854, one year before Kierkegaard's death, and it is highly unlikely that he studied him before that date, even though he certainly must have heard about him through other writers such as Poul Martin Møller (Simonella Davini "Schopenhauer: Kierkegaard's Late Encounter with His Opposite," pp. 277–278). Davini also draws attention to the similarities in Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer's view of music, but does not elaborate the point (p. 279).

111 *EO1*, 62 / *SKS* 2, 69.

112 Cf. Plato *Symposium*, 180e; and Xenophon *Symposium*, 8.2–8.15.

113 *EO1*, 65 / *SKS* 2, 72.

home is language.<sup>114</sup> So he will go to the outmost boundary of that kingdom to get some understanding of music.

Music, too, is considered by A as a kind of language. But what is language? We might to be sure insist that “every expression of an idea is always a language, since the essence of the idea is language. Clever folk therefore speak of the language of nature and soft-headed clergy occasionally open the book of nature for us and read something that neither they nor their listeners understand. If the observation that music is a language did not amount to anything more than that, I would not bother with it but would let it go unchallenged and pass for what it is. But that is not the case. Not until spirit is posited is language installed in its rights.”<sup>115</sup> Kant had still linked the beauty of nature to the old view of nature as a book,<sup>116</sup> a view that A here ridicules. See also, “Apart from language, music is the only medium that is addressed to the ear, but what affects the ear is the purely sensate; therefore nature is mute, and it is a ludicrous fancy that one hears something because one hears a cow bellow or what is perhaps more pretentious, a nightingale warble; it is fancy that one hears something, a fancy that one is worth more than the other, since it is all six of one and a half dozen of the other.”<sup>117</sup> A’s nightingale deserves comparison with that of Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*.<sup>118</sup> A dissertation could and perhaps should be written on invocations of the nightingale and their significance.

Once again A is close to Hegel, who has little interest in the beauties of nature.<sup>119</sup> What is at stake here is whether something like spirit with-

---

114 EO1, 66 / SKS 2, 73.

115 *Ibid.*

116 Cf. *Kritik der Urtheilskraft, Werke*, vol. 5, § 42, p. 302: “The charms in beautiful nature, which we so often find fused, as it were, with beautiful form, belong either to the modifications of light (in coloring) or of sound (in tones). For these are the only sensations that allow not merely for a feeling of sense, but also for reflection on the form of these modifications of the senses, so that they contain, as it were, a language in which nature speaks to us and which seems to have a higher meaning. Thus a lily’s white color seems to attune the mind to ideas of innocence. . . . A bird’s song proclaims its joyfulness and contentment with its existence. At least this is how we interpret nature, whether or not it has this intention” (English translation as found in Immanuel Kant *Critique of Judgment*, p. 169).

117 EO1, 68 / SKS 2, 74.

118 Cf. *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, p. 302.

119 Cf. G. W. F. Hegel *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik, Werke*, vol. 13, pp. 13–15; 190–202.

out answers spirit within, answers the human spirit. For A language is the perfect medium precisely because it negates everything sensuous: “Therefore, it is foolish to say that nature is a language, certainly as foolish as to say that the mute speaks since it is not even a language in the way sign language is. But that is not the case with language. The sensuous is reduced to a mere instrument and is thus annulled. If a person speaks in such a way that we heard the flapping of his tongue etc., he would be speaking poorly; if he heard in such a way that he heard the vibrations of the ear instead of the words, he would be hearing poorly; if he read a book in such a way that he continually saw each individual letter, he would be reading poorly. Language is the perfect medium precisely when everything sensuous is negated.”<sup>120</sup> The quote invites challenge, both with respect to poetry and with respect to an understanding of painting that with Alberti would make the material painting as transparent as a pane of glass through which we see what is beyond and taken to really matter.<sup>121</sup> But could it be that the point of poetry is to invite what A here considers a poor hearing and reading? And something analogous would hold for painting. Could it be that both have the task of undoing that negation of the sensuous demanded by the spirit that presides over our Christian or rather post-Christian world?

A himself recognizes that the view of language he has advanced fails to do justice to poetry: “If I assume that prose is the language form that is most remote from music, I already detect in oration, in the sonorous construction of its periods, an echo of the musical, which emerges ever more strongly at various stages in the poetic declamation, in the metrical construction, in the rhyme, until finally the musical element has developed so strongly that language leaves off and everything becomes music.”<sup>122</sup> Music expresses immediacy in its immediacy,<sup>123</sup> more precisely it expresses the immediate qualified by spirit, but in such a way that it falls outside the realm of spirit: “But if the immediate, qualified by spirit, is qualified in such a way that it is outside the realm of spirit, then music has in this its absolute theme. For the former immediacy it is unessential for it to be expressed in music, whereas it is essential for it to

---

120 EO1, 67–68 / SKS 2, 74.

121 Cf. Leon Battista Alberti *On Painting*, p. 52. Cf. also Karsten Harries *Infinity and Perspective*, Chapter 4, pp. 64–77.

122 EO1, 69 / SKS 2, 75.

123 EO1, 70 / SKS 2, 76.

become spirit and consequently to be expressed in language. For the latter, however, it is essential that it be expressed in music; it can be expressed only therein and cannot be expressed in language, since it is qualified by spirit in such a way that it does not come within the realm of spirit and thus is outside the realm of language. But the immediacy that is thus excluded by spirit is sensuous immediacy. This is linked to Christianity. Sensuous immediacy has its absolute medium in music, and this also explains why music in the ancient world did not become properly developed but is linked to the Christian world. So it is the medium for the immediacy that, qualified by spirit, is qualified in such a way that it is outside the realm of spirit."<sup>124</sup> This then, "sensuousness in its elemental originality," is music's absolute theme. We should note that here already Kierkegaard distinguishes an immediacy that is lower than the universal from another that is, if only ambiguously, higher than the universal. Consider in this connection Kierkegaard's Abraham, who like music, has something demonic about him.<sup>125</sup>

## 7

But so understood, does music not belong to the devil, where once again we may want to see the devil as Dionysus transformed by Christianity. Must religion not exclude it: "If I trace religious fervor on this point, I can broadly define the movement as follows: the more rigorous the religiousness, the more music is given up and words are emphasized. The different stages in this regard are represented in world history. I would embellish these statements with a multiplicity of specific comments, but I shall refrain and merely quote a few words by a Presbyterian who appears in the story by Achim v. Arnim; 'Wir Presbyterianer halten die Orgel für des Teufels Dudelsack, womit er den Ernst der Betrachtung in Schlummer wiegt, so wie der Tanz die guten Vorsätze betäubt. [We Presbyterians regard the organ as the devil's bagpipe, with which he lulls to sleep the earnestness of contemplation, just as dance deadens good intentions].'"<sup>126</sup> The following quotation is especially close to Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*: "It by no means follows that one must regard it as the devil's work, even though our age provides

---

124 EO1, 70–71 / SKS 2, 76–77.

125 Cf. "Problema III" in *Fear and Trembling (FT)*, 82–120 / SKS 4, 172–207.

126 EO1, 72–73 / SKS 2, 78–79.

many horrible proofs of the demonic power with which music can grip an individual and this individual intrigues and ensnares the crowd, especially a crowd of women, in the seductive snares of anxiety by means of the full provocative force of voluptuousness. It by no means follows that one must regard it as the devil's work, even though one detects with a certain secret horror that this art, more than any other art, frequently torments its devotees in a terrible way, a phenomenon, strangely enough, that seems to have escaped attention of the psychologists and the mass, except on a particular occasion when they are alarmed by a desperate individual's scream of anxiety. But it is quite noteworthy that in folk legends, and consequently in the folk consciousness that the legends express, the musical is again the demonic. I cite, as an example, *Irische Elfenmärchen* by Grimm.<sup>127</sup>

---

127 *EO1*, 73 / *SKS 2*, 79.

## 4. Don Juan

### 1

I pointed out that A places sensuality in the context of a Hegelian history of spirit. We might thus ask: what form of sensuality, or more specifically of the erotic, corresponds to Hegel's symbolic, classical and romantic stages of art. We would end up with *historical stages of the erotic*, where it is tempting to read the historical development in the image of personal development, as Hegel himself does when he links the death of art to the coming of age of humanity.<sup>128</sup> We might thus inquire into the stages of the erotic evolution of the individual. Thus we might ask: what is the place of the erotic in the life of someone who has come truly of age.

But it cannot be in this sense that A uses the word stages when he speaks of "The Immediate Stages of the Erotic." "Moreover, when I use the word 'stage' as I did and continue to do, it must not be taken to mean that each stage exists independently, the one outside the other. I could perhaps more appropriately use the word 'metamorphosis.' The different stages collectively make up the immediate stage, and from this it will be seen that the specific stages are more a disclosure of a predicate in such a way that all the predicates plunge down in the richness of the last stage, since this is the stage proper. The other stages have no independent existence; by themselves they are only for representation, and from that we also see their fortuitousness in relation to the last stage. But since they have found a separate expression in Mozart's music, I shall discuss them separately. But, above all, they must not be thought of as persons on different levels with respect to consciousness, since even the last stage has not yet attained consciousness; at all times I am only dealing with the immediate in its total immediacy."<sup>129</sup> One is indeed tempted to embody these stages in persons as they are embodied in characters from Mozart's operas, in Cherubino, Papageno, and Don Giovanni respectively. But A quite explicitly denies that these stages be thought of as persons, a point to which he keeps returning.

---

128 Cf. G. W. F. Hegel *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik, Werke*, vol. 13, pp. 23–26.  
129 *EO1*, 74 / *SKS 2*, 80.

They embody ideas, which as ideas remain abstract, even as they refer us to immediacy. But what does A here mean by immediacy?

## 2

A says that he is indebted for all that he has to say to Mozart, so we do well to turn to Mozart for an answer to this question, first to the music, not to the words, associated with Cherubino from *The Marriage of Figaro*: “Now, if I were to venture an attempt at characterizing Mozart’s music with a single predicate pertaining to the Page in Figaro, I would say: It is intoxicated with erotic love; but like all intoxication, an intoxication with erotic love can also have two effects, either a heightened transparent joy of life or a concentrated obscure depression. The later is the case with the music here, and this is indeed proper. The music cannot express why this is so, for it is beyond its power to do that. Words cannot express the mood, for it is too heavy and dense to be borne by words – only music can render it. The basis of its melancholy lies in the deep inner contradiction we tried to point out earlier.”<sup>130</sup> We shall have to return to this “inner contradiction.” What matters to me here is A’s understanding of music as the “language” of moods. It is a view that has antecedents that go back at least to Plato and looks forward to Heidegger (see the discussion of mood in *Being and Time*).<sup>131</sup> More immediately A’s understanding of music invites comparison with that of Schopenhauer, who understands it as the artistic expression of the will, which invites comparison with Plato’s eros and finds its most striking expression in desire.

The different stages of the erotic are associated with moods. More specifically they are associated with metamorphoses of the mood of desire. “If it is kept in mind that desire is present in all three stages, then it can be said that in the first stage it is qualified as *dreaming*, in the second as *seeking*, in the third as *desiring*.”<sup>132</sup> Cherubino is associated with dreaming desire. The mood of desire here still lacks a clear focus. It is described by A as the awakening of desire: “The sensuous awakens, yet not to motion but to a still quiescence, not to delight and joy but to deep melancholy. As yet desire is not awake; it is intimated in the

---

130 *EO1*, 78 / *SKS 2*, 83–84.

131 Martin Heidegger *Sein und Zeit*, p. 162 / *Being and Time*, p. 205.

132 *EO1*, 80–81 / *SKS 2*, 86.

melancholy. That which is desired is continuously present in the desire; it arises from it and appears in a bewildering dawning.”<sup>133</sup> “Desire, consequently, which in this stage is present only in a presentiment of itself, is devoid of motion, devoid of unrest, only gently rocked by an unaccountable inner emotion. Just as the life of the plant is confined to the earth, so it is lost in a quiet, ever present longing, absorbed in contemplation, and still cannot discharge its object, essentially because in a profound sense there is no object, and yet this lack of an object is not its object, for then it would immediately be in motion, then it would be defined, if in no other way, by grief and pain; but grief and pain do not have the implicit contradiction characteristic of melancholy or depression, do not have the ambiguity that is the sweetness in melancholy.”<sup>134</sup> For this reason A finds it fitting that the music is “arranged for a woman’s voice.”<sup>135</sup>

## 3

With Papageno we turn from dreaming to seeking desire. “In Papageno desire aims at discoveries. This urge to discover is the pulsation in it, its liveliness. It does not find the proper object of this exploration, but it discovers the multiplicity in seeking therein the object that it wants to discover. In this way desire is awakened, but it is not qualified as desire.”<sup>136</sup> Cherubino has an androgynous character. That androgyny is lost as desire awakens. What A here has to tell us could be seen as a retelling of Aristophanes’ myth in the *Symposium*. “As is known, Papageno accompanies his cheerful liveliness on a reed flute. Surely every ear has felt strangely moved by this accompaniment. But the more one thinks about it, the more one sees in Papageno the mythical Papageno, the more expressive and the more characteristic it proves to be. One does not weary of hearing it over and over again, for it is the absolutely adequate expression of Papageno’s whole life, whose whole life is such an uninterrupted twittering, without a care twittering away uninterruptedly in complete idleness, and who is happy and contented because this is the substance of his life, happy in his work and happy in his sing-

---

133 *EO1*, 75 / *SKS 2*, 81.

134 *EO1*, 76–77 / *SKS 2*, 82.

135 *EO1*, 77 / *SKS 2*, 83.

136 *EO1*, 80 / *SKS 2*, 86.

ing.”<sup>137</sup> A finds it fitting that Papageno should play a flute and contrasts his flute playing favorably with that of the opera’s hero, Tamino. Indeed the whole opera strikes A as misconceived, misconceived first of all because of its ethical dimension. We certainly do not have here a classical work in A’s sense. Is what prevents it from being a classical work its ethical cast? But I continue with A’s discussion: “As is known, the opera is very profoundly designed in such a way that Papageno’s and Tamino’s flutes harmonize with each other. And yet what difference! Tamino’s flute, which nevertheless is the one the play is named after, miscarries completely, and why? Because Tamino is simply not a musical character. This is due to the misbegotten structure of the whole opera.”<sup>138</sup> The plot of the *Zauberflöte* is indeed a bit hard to take und unravel. This, coupled with Mozart’s extraordinary music, invites us to look in it for a deep hermetic wisdom.<sup>139</sup> “Tamino is completely beyond the musical, just as in general the spiritual development the play wants to accomplish is a completely unmusical idea.”<sup>140</sup> Interesting is the comment that follows. One wonders what Freud would have had to say here: “Music is indeed excellent for driving away thoughts, even evil thoughts. As in the case of David, whose playing is said to have driven away Saul’s evil mood. But there is a considerable illusion here, for it does so only insofar as it leads the consciousness back to immediacy and soothes it therein. Therefore the individual may feel happy in the moment of intoxication but becomes only all the more unhappy. Here I may be permitted a comment quite *in paranthesi*. Music has been used to cure insanity and in a certain sense this goal has been attained, and yet this is an illusion. When insanity has a mental basis, it is always due to a hardening at some time in the consciousness. This hardening must be overcome, but for it to be truly overcome the road to be taken must be the very opposite of the one that leads to music.”<sup>141</sup>

---

137 EO1, 82 / SKS 2, 87.

138 EO1, 82 / SKS 2, 87–88.

139 See Jan Assmann *Die Zauberflöte*.

140 EO1, 82 / SKS 2, 88.

141 EO1, 82–83 / SKS 2, 88.

## 4

In *Don Giovanni*, finally, desire is absolutely qualified as desire. “The contradiction in the first stage consisted in the inability of desire to find an object, but, without having desired, desire did possess its object and could not begin desiring. In the second stage, the object appears in its multiplicity, but since desire seeks its object in this multiplicity, in the more profound sense it still has no object; it is still not qualified as desire. In *Don Giovanni*, however, desire is absolutely qualified as desire; intensively and extensively it is the immediate unity of the two previous stages. The first stage ideally desired the one; the second desired the particular in the category of multiplicity; the third stage is the unity of the two. In the particular, desire has its absolute object; it desires the particular absolutely. In this resides the seductiveness that we shall discuss later.”<sup>142</sup> We are struck by A’s Hegelian construction of his stages, leaving us to wonder about this affinity of his aestheticism to Hegel’s philosophy.<sup>143</sup>

Just to suggest how closely *Either/Or* should be read let me call attention to the following passage: “Therefore, I shall not give a running commentary on the music, which essentially cannot contain anything but subjective incidentals and idiosyncrasies and can only apply to something corresponding to the reader.”<sup>144</sup> Is “The Seducer’s Diary” then a “running commentary” on *Don Giovanni* that A here professes not to want to write? Compare with this the beginning of the “Diary,” which is presented to us as “*commentarius perpetuus* [Running commentary] no. 4.”<sup>145</sup> On the opposite page we find two lines from *Don Giovanni*’s Aria no. 4, the catalogue aria, where his predominant passion is said to be young girls.

But let me return to Don Juan: “[T]he issue here is not desire in a particular individual, but desire as a principle, qualified by spirit as that which spirit excludes. This is the idea of the elemental originality of the sensuous, as suggested above. The expression of this idea is Don Juan, and the expression for Don Juan, in turn, is simply and solely

---

142 *EO1*, 84–85 / *SKS 2*, 90.

143 A reading of the different stages of desire in A’s discussion along Hegelian lines has been provided by Stephen N. Dunning in his *Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of Inwardness*, pp. 33–39.

144 *EO1*, 86 / *SKS 2*, 91.

145 *EO1*, 303 / *SKS 2*, 293.

music.”<sup>146</sup> A goes on to discuss particular aspects of the Don Juan idea. Who then is Don Juan? Faust and Don Juan are said by A to be the two demonic figures to which Christianity had to give rise. We have already considered A’s claim that it was Christianity that brought sensuousness into the world. Just by insisting that what mattered about the human being was the spirit, not the body, it made the body, and especially the sphere of the erotic, something to be negated, to be fought against. But the body does make claims on us. This the Christian could not deny. But claims that should not be listened to are temptations. Thus for Christianity the body became a field of temptations. Rivaling the accepted ideal of the spiritual life, a counter-ideal thus appeared, that of a life of sensuousness. Just by excluding sensuousness, Christianity posited sensuousness as a power. With the Greeks sensuousness was still in harmony with the whole self. Christianity cuts this bond: “The Middle Ages had to make the discord between the flesh and the spirit that Christianity brought into the world the subject of its reflection and to that end personified each of the conflicting forces. Don Juan, then, if I dare say so, is the incarnation of the flesh by the spirit of the flesh itself.”<sup>147</sup> Don Juan is the first born of the realm of Venus: “In the Middle Ages much was told about a mountain that is not found on any map; it is called Mount Venus. There sensuousness has its home; there it has its wild pleasures, for it is a kingdom, a state. In this kingdom language has no home, nor the collectedness of thought, nor the laborious achievements of reflection; there is heard only the elemental voice of passion, the play of desires, the wild noise of intoxication. There everything is only one giddy round of pleasure. The first born of this kingdom is Don Juan.”<sup>148</sup> In Don Juan Christianity thinks sensuousness as concentrated in one individual.

Why is music, according to A, alone able to do justice to this idea? The passage just quoted hints at his answer: “In this kingdom language has no home, nor the collectedness of thought, nor the laborious achievements of reflection; there is heard only the elemental voice of passion, the play of desires, the wild noise of intoxication.”<sup>149</sup> Why is there no room for language, reflection, thought in this realm? The nature of sensuousness as here thought is such that words, thought, and reflection

---

146 *EO1*, 85 / *SKS* 2, 90.

147 *EO1*, 88 / *SKS* 2, 93.

148 *EO1*, 90 / *SKS* 2, 94.

149 *Ibid.*

are incompatible with it. The immediate cannot really be described or understood. For what is understanding? Understanding presupposes something like a distance between him who understands and what is understood. There is a sense in which language liberates us from the situation we are assigned by the body, opens up an invisible realm beyond the sensuous. Sensible signs make it possible to present what is absent, invisible, non-sensuous. Language thus opens up a space of possibilities, which is a space of freedom. But when the true home of the soul is sought in this space, the whole self is split. Once again we have a version of the Aristophanic myth, but now it is cast in a different key: now the splitting agent is not the awakening of desire, but the awakening of consciousness.

Consciousness is the negation of and haunted by the possibility of a return to immediacy. Every Faust is thus haunted by the idea of Don Juan, dreams of becoming a Don Juan. And yet, much as he may try to attempt this, that idea cannot be realized in principle. No one can become Don Juan. And A's reasoning here is simple enough: To be an individual is to be determined by spirit, i. e. to think, reflect, use language. Apart from that there can be no individuality. But Don Juan is thought as the incarnation of the negation of spirit. From this it follows that Don Juan cannot be an individual. Don Juan can therefore also not be represented as an individual. He may not become distinct in this way. Words are too definite to do justice to this idea. Don Juan thus resists poetic representation. To do justice to the Don Juan idea, we require a different medium, require music. "The reason that this idea, compared with Faust, has such a meager past is no doubt due to something enigmatic in it as long as it was not perceived that music is its proper medium. Faust is idea, but an idea that also is essentially an individual. To conceive of the spiritual-demonic concentrated in one individual is natural to thought, whereas to conceive of the sensuous in one individual is impossible. Don Juan continually hovers between being an idea – that is, power, life – and being an individual. But this hovering is the musical vibration. When the sea heaves and is rough, the seething waves in their turbulence form pictures resembling creatures; it seems as if it were these creatures that set the waves in motion, and yet it is, conversely, the swelling waves that form them. Thus, Don Juan is a picture that is continually coming into view but does not attain form and consistency, an individual who is continually being formed but is never finished,

about whose history one cannot learn except by listening to the noise of the waves."<sup>150</sup>

When imagined as a real person Don Juan becomes ludicrous and frightfully boring. 1003 in Spain alone! The writer will always tend to make Don Juan into a reflective individual, more like the Seducer than like Mozart's Don Giovanni.<sup>151</sup> To be sure, Don Giovanni, too, is a seducer, although "he is seductive" is more adequate than "he seduces." "He desires, and this desire acts seductively. To this extent then he does seduce. He enjoys the satisfaction of desire; as soon as he has enjoyed it he seeks a new object and so it goes on indefinitely. Thus he does indeed deceive, but still not in such a way that he plans his deception in advance; it is the power of the sensuous itself that deceives the seduced, and it is rather a kind of nemesis. He desires and continually goes on desiring and continually enjoys the satisfaction of desire. He lacks the time to be a seducer, the time beforehand in which to lay his plan, and the time afterward in which to become conscious of his act. A seducer therefore ought to have a power that Don Giovanni does not have, however well equipped he is otherwise: the power of words. As soon as we give him the power of words, he ceases to be musical, and the esthetic interest becomes a different one."<sup>152</sup> What then is the force by which Don Juan seduces: "It is the energy of desire, the energy of sensuous desire. He desires total femininity in every woman, and therein lies the sensuous idealizing force with which he simultaneously enhances and overcomes his prey."<sup>153</sup> Don Juan enhances his prey by transfiguring her into something rather like the Platonic form of femininity. The seduced woman experiences herself as no longer just one of many, but as herself the eternally feminine. That experience lets her lose hold of herself as this unique individual and allows Don Juan to have his way with her. But as that arbitrary number, 1003, suggests, she is of course just one of many. The other side of such transfiguration of an individual in the image of total femininity is total indifference to the individual and her fate.

That literature has difficulty doing justice to the idea of sensuousness has already been shown. That point is underscored by the second section of the essay: "Other Versions of Don Juan Considered in Relation

---

150 *EO1*, 92 / *SKS 2*, 96–97.

151 Cf. Max Frisch *Don Juan oder Die Liebe zur Geometrie*.

152 *EO1*, 99 / *SKS 2*, 102–103.

153 *EO1*, 100 / *SKS 2*, 103.

to the Musical Interpretation.” In this connection A calls Byron’s Don Juan a failure: “Therefore Byron’s *Don Juan* must be judged a failure because it stretches out epically. The immediate Don Juan must seduce 1003; the reflective Don Juan needs to seduce only one, and how he does it is what occupies us. The reflective Don Juan’s seduction is a tour de force in which every particular little episode has its special significance; the musical Don Juan’s seduction is a turn of the hand, a matter of the moment, more quickly done than said. It reminds me of a tableau I once saw. A handsome young man, a real ladies’ man. He was playing with some young girls, all of them at that dangerous age when they are neither adults nor children. Among other things they amused themselves by jumping over a ditch. He stood at the edge and helped them jump by taking them around the waist, lifting them lightly into the air, and setting them down on the other side. It was a charming picture; I delighted in him as much as in the young girls. Then I thought of Don Juan. They themselves run into his arms, these young girls; then he seizes them, and just as quickly sets them down on the other side of the ditch of life.”<sup>154</sup> Suggestive is especially the last part of this comment. Did Kierkegaard see himself in the image of this young man?

The failure of literature to do justice to the erotic could be traced in works that attempt to do justice to sensuousness by describing the sexual act in great detail, by making it definite. If A is right, they will achieve the very opposite: just such descriptions must fail to do justice to the erotic. To do so in language, one would have to use language in such a way that it turns against itself, negates itself, so that words become arrows pointing to what is other than language. What might such a work be like? To readers able to handle the German I would recommend Hans Henny Jahn’s *Perrudja*.

A concludes his discussion with some remarks on the “Inner Musical Construction of the Opera.” I want to single out just two passages: one on the overture, because it invites us to look at the “Diapsalmata” as the overture of the first part of *Either/Or*. “This is not the place to explain the overall importance the overture has for the opera; here it can only be emphasized that opera’s requirement of an overture demonstrates sufficiently the predominance of the lyrical, and that the intended effect is to evoke a mood, something that drama cannot get involved with, since everything there must be transparent. Therefore it is appropriate

---

154 *EO1*, 108–109 / *SKS* 2, 111–112.

that the overture is composed last so that the artist himself can be saturated with the music. Hence, the overture generally provides a profound glimpse into the composer and his psychical relation to his music. If he fails to catch in it what is central, if he does not have a more profound rapport with the basic mood of the opera, then this will unmistakably betray itself in the overture; then it becomes an assemblage of the salient points interlaced with a loose association of ideas but not the totality that contains, as it really should, the most penetrating elucidation of the content of the music."<sup>155</sup> The overture should communicate the basic mood, the *Grundstimmung* of the work. A names that mood desire. What then is the *Grundstimmung* communicated by the "Diapsalmata"? A melancholy boredom.

And finally A's remark on the Champagne aria: "What it means to say – that Don Giovanni's essential nature is music – is clearly apparent here. He dissolves, as it were, in music for us; he unfurls in a world of sounds. This aria has been called the champagne aria, and undoubtedly this is very suggestive. But what we must see especially is that it does not stand in an accidental relationship to Don Giovanni. Such is his life, effervescing like champagne. And just as the beads in this wine, as it simmers with an internal heat, sonorous with its own melody, rise and continue to rise, just so the lust for enjoyment resonates in the elemental boiling that is his life. Therefore the dramatic significance of this aria comes not from the situation but from this, that here the opera's dominant tone sounds and resonates in itself."<sup>156</sup>

---

155 *EO1*, 126 / *SKS 2*, 128.

156 *EO1*, 134 / *SKS 2*, 136.

## 5. Modern Tragedy

### 1

Today I want to turn from the essay on “The Immediate Erotic Stages” to three essays tied together by the fact that they are supposedly read at meetings of the *Symparanekekromenoi*. The essays are “The Tragic in Ancient Drama,” “Silhouettes,” and “The Unhappiest One.”

First then the question: Who are these *Symparanekekromenoi*? The English translation suggested is “Fellowship of the Dead,”<sup>157</sup> although, as the footnote to the Hongs’ edition tells you, the term, a Greek word invented by Kierkegaard, could also be rendered as “The Society of Buried Lives.”<sup>158</sup> Kierkegaard is addressing a society of individuals who are living lives that are spiritually or mentally entombed.<sup>159</sup> It is a society of which, as the prefix *sym* suggests, A is most definitely a member. We learn more about the nature of this society at the beginning of the second essay: “We celebrate in this hour the founding of our society, we rejoice anew that the happy occasion has repeated itself, that the longest day is over and night begins to triumph. We have waited all the day long; just a moment ago we sighed over its length, but now our despair is transformed into joy. To be sure, the victory is not great, and the preponderance of day will last for a long time, but that its domination has been broken does not escape our attention. Therefore, we do not postpone our celebration over the victory of the night until it is plain to all; we do not postpone it until the torpid bourgeois life reminds us that day is declining. No, as a young bride impatiently awaits the coming of night, so we longingly wait for the first onset of night, the first announcement of its coming victory, and the more we have been inclined to despair over our being able to hold out if the days were not shortened, the greater our joy and surprise.”<sup>160</sup> The festival they celebrate is thus a parody of the traditional midsummer-night festival, as such the inverse of the traditional winter celebration that cele-

---

157 *EO1*, 137.

158 *EO1*, 623, n. 1.

159 Cf. Swenson’s footnote in Søren Kierkegaard *Either/Or*, p. 376.

160 *EO1*, 167 / *SKS* 2, 165.

brates the year's longest night. The Symparanekromenoi dislike the day, they like the night from which they expect forgetfulness, they praise death which will release them from life. In this sense they may be considered Schopenhauerian pessimists, in love with the night, although their love is burdened by the reference to repetition. If day will not be victorious in the end, nor will night.

But the coming of night is also given a cultural interpretation: "Therefore, we do not postpone our celebration over the victory of the night until it is plain to all; we do not postpone it until the torpid bourgeois life reminds us that day is declining."<sup>161</sup> Torpid bourgeois life is taken as a reminder that day is declining. Ours is after all the *Abendland*, the land of the declining day, and like many readers of Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, the Symparanekromenoi, are intoxicated by such decline.<sup>162</sup>

But just what is it that makes the day so intolerable? The last sentence of "The Unhappiest One" gives us a hint: "Arise, dear Symparanekromenoi. The night is over; the day is beginning its unflagging activity again, never, so it seems, tired of repeating itself forever and ever."<sup>163</sup> Repetition is here seen negatively as something that must be negated. The repetitive is the boring. This of course calls for further comment and much Kierkegaard has written is an extended commentary on repetition.<sup>164</sup> Here a few preliminary comments will have to suffice: Repetition is tied to a sense that things are always this way: I come back to the same activities, the same places. But is repetition not also a mark of what we find most profoundly meaningful? The first crocus in spring, the first snowflake in late fall? Perhaps we can rather schematically oppose in human beings a demand for freedom to a demand for security, a desire for autonomy to a desire to exist as a part of some larger whole. To the former repetition manifests itself as the boring, to be negated by the novel and therefore interesting; to the latter repetition manifests itself as the reliable and lasting that delivers us from the accidental and ephemeral.

---

161 *Ibid.*

162 Cf. Oswald Spengler *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*; English translation *The Decline of the West*.

163 EO1, 230 / SKS 2, 223

164 Kierkegaard's concept of repetition has received particular attention in the secondary scholarship. For two comprehensive approaches, cf. Dorothea Glöckner *Kierkegaards Begriff der Wiederholung* and Niels Nymann Eriksen *Kierkegaard's Category of Repetition*.

The Symparanekromenoi may be understood as a society of bored people, for repetition, as A will claim in the “Rotation of Crops,” is the essence of boredom. To escape from boredom, the Symparanekromenoi escape into the dark, into the night that permits them to dream of something more interesting. They turn away from the world to find something more interesting in their reflections. They are thus a group of reflective individuals, of introverts. – Just in passing I want to note that the distinction between extroverts and introverts has been said (by Emanuel Hirsch)<sup>165</sup> to go back to this passage from the first of these essays: “Her life does not unfold like the Greek Antigone’s; it is turned inward, not outward. The stage is inside, not outside; it is a spiritual stage.”<sup>166</sup> This is also true of the Symparanekromenoi; they are the most modern of the moderns in that reflection has made them introverts in the most extreme sense. Like Antigone, they have been buried alive, and it is their pride that has so buried them.

## 2

How do the three essays fit together? The first is described as a “venture in fragmentary endeavor” delivered before the Symparanekromenoi.<sup>167</sup> The second is described as a psychological diversion, once again delivered before the Symparanekromenoi.<sup>168</sup> The third is described as an inspired address.<sup>169</sup> As in the volume as a whole, we can detect in these pieces a movement from immediacy to reflection, from the unreflective sorrow of the Greeks to the unhappiness of the most reflective man. Just as the book as a whole traces the reflective development of the erotic, so these three essays describe the development from pre-reflective sorrow to reflective unhappiness.

---

165 Sören Kierkegaard *Entweder/Oder*. Erster Teil, Band 1, p. xi, n. 140.

166 *EO1*, 157 / *SKS 2*, 155.

167 *EO1*, 137 / *SKS 2*, 137.

168 *EO1*, 165 / *SKS 2*, 163.

169 *EO1*, 217 / *SKS 2*, 211.

## 3

But let me turn to the first and most important of these essays, “The Tragic in Ancient Drama, Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama.” The essay is divided into two parts separated by an interlude: the first describes the contrast between the ancient and the modern in rather general terms, the second part develops it more concretely by opposing to the Greek *Antigone* her modern counterpart.

The general point is perhaps best made with respect to the guilt of the tragic hero. The guilt of the Greek tragic hero, A points out, is not only of his own doing. “In ancient tragedy, the action itself has an epic element; it is just as much event as action. This, of course, is because the ancient world did not have subjectivity reflected in itself. Even if the individual moved freely, he nevertheless rested in substantial determinants, in the state, the family, in fate. This substantial determination is the essential, fateful factor in Greek tragedy and its essential characteristic. The hero’s downfall, therefore, is not a result solely of his action but is also a suffering, whereas in modern tragedy the hero’s downfall is not really suffering but is a deed.”<sup>170</sup> As the endnote to the English translation points out, A relies here on Hegel.<sup>171</sup> Consider this passage from Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*: “The right of the subject’s particularity, his right to be satisfied, or in other words the right of subjective freedom, is the pivot and center of the difference between antiquity and modern times. This right in its infinity is given expression in Christianity and it has become the universal effective principle of a new form of civilization. Amongst the primary shapes which this right assumes are love, romanticism, the quest for the eternal salvation of the individual, etc.; next come moral convictions and conscience; and, finally, the other forms, some of which come into prominence in what follows as the principle of civil society and as moments in the constitution of the state, while others appear in the course of history, particularly the history of art, science, and philosophy.”<sup>172</sup> What happens to the hero

---

170 *EO1*, 143 / *SKS 2*, 143.

171 *EO1*, 626, n. 13.

172 G. W. F. Hegel *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts, Werke*, vol. 7, § 124, p. 233. English translation as found in *EO1*, 626, n. 13. The relationship of Kierkegaard’s discussion of modern and ancient drama to Hegel has also been explored with specific reference to the latter’s account of *Antigone* by, amongst others, Jon Stewart *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, pp. 218–225, and Walter Rehm “Kierkegaards Antigone.” Stewart also suggests that A’s dis-

in a Greek tragedy is a fate he suffers and accepts, perhaps because his family is subject to the wrath of the gods, perhaps because of some unknown fate. Thus Oedipus cannot be called guilty in an ethical sense, for although he violated the moral law, he didn't do so knowingly. It was his fate to kill his father and marry his mother, and before this fate all his precautions proved powerless. There is thus in a tragedy like *Oedipus* an established order, including nature, family, and state. The individual accepts his place in that order without questioning. And yet, by doing something that at first seems harmless, even right, he finds himself a transgressor. That the individual is not really responsible for his transgression is emphasized by making the hero a member of a family subject to a tragic fate, such as the family of Labdakos, whose grandson Oedipus is. Modern tragedy is different: "Thus in the modern period situation and character are in fact predominant. The tragic hero is subjectively reflected in himself, and this reflection has not only reflected him out of every immediate relation to state, kindred, and fate but often has even reflected him out of his own past life. What concerns us is a certain specific element of his life as his own deed. For this reason, the tragic can be exhausted in situation and lines because no immediacy is left at all. Therefore, modern tragedy has no epic foreground, no epic remainder. The hero stands and falls entirely on his own deeds."<sup>173</sup>

What, we may well ask, is edifying about a tragedy like Oedipus? The guilt of the Greek hero is something indefinite. Oedipus is only ambiguously guilty, i. e. tragic guilt here is not moral guilt. More than being the result of a definite action, guilt in Greek tragedy is part of human existence in so far as human beings are in the hands of the gods and an often arbitrary, opaque fate. The mood evoked by this A calls sorrow.

Important here is the way A relates the consolation offered by Greek tragedy to that offered by religion: "Intrinsically, the tragic is infinitely gentle; esthetically it is to human life what divine grace and compassion are; it is even more benign, and therefore I say that it is a motherly love that lulls the troubled one. The ethical judgment is rigorous and hard.

---

inction between modern and ancient tragedy may derive from Hegel's discussion of the same topic in the section "Unterschied der antiken und modernen dramatischen Poesie" in his *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik, Werke*, vol. 15, pp. 534–538, which Kierkegaard had studied by the time he wrote *Either/Or* (*Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel, op. cit.*, p. 219–220).

Therefore, if a criminal wants to excuse himself by saying that his mother had a propensity for stealing, especially during the time she was pregnant with him, the judge obtains the health officer's opinion of his mental condition and decides that he is dealing with a thief and not with the thief's mother."<sup>174</sup> Once we have experienced the full weight of what the moral law demands, the kind of consolation offered by tragedy is denied to us. Modernity has left the tragic behind: "Our age has lost all the substantial categories of family, state, kindred; it must turn the single individual over to himself completely in such a way that, strictly speaking, he becomes his own creator. Consequently his guilt is sin, his pain repentance, but thereby the tragic is cancelled."<sup>175</sup> One may well wonder whether with his claim that modernity has left the tragic behind Kierkegaard fails to do justice to the sorrow that in a different way does seem to underlie also our modern ethical tragedies. Let us imagine someone caught between two ethical commands that cannot both be obeyed. Imagine a case where, quite as in the Greek *Antigone*, duty to family conflicts with duty to state. We can imagine such situations in a way that the human being cannot but become guilty, so that once again guilt becomes ambiguous. In this sense it is difficult to see how anyone involved in a modern war, can escape guilt. This guilt has its foundation once again not so much in the actions of the individual, as in the situation into which he has been cast, a situation not of his choosing. Sorrow becomes inescapable.

There is also another kind of tragedy, which we can perhaps call the tragedy of the absurd. I am thinking especially of Heinrich von Kleist, who committed suicide in 1811. Kleist still believed in love. But in his stories the lovers are destroyed by some pointless happening. There are no gods who persecute mortals, nor a fate that follows a family, no transgression committed unknowingly, but just an incomprehensible accident.

A to be sure insists that modernity has left the tragic behind. The only comfort, he suggests, left to the modern evildoer is religious in nature: "In a certain sense, therefore, it is a very appropriate discretion on the part of the age to want to make the individual responsible for everything; the trouble is that it does not do it profoundly and inwardly enough, and hence its half-measures. It is conceited enough to disdain the tears of tragedy, but it is also conceited enough to want to do with-

---

174 *EO1*, 145–146 / *SKS 2*, 145.

175 *EO1*, 149 / *SKS 2*, 148.

out mercy. And what, after all, is human life, the human race, when these two things are taken away? Either the sadness of the tragic or the profound sorrow and profound joy of religion. Or is this not the striking feature of everything that originates in that happy people – a depression of spirit, a sadness in their art, in their poetry, in their life, in their joy?”<sup>176</sup> A here presents us with his own *Either/Or*: either religion or tragedy. Nietzsche would have been receptive to what A here has to say. But A, too, conceited enough to disdain both, refuses to confront this *Either/Or*.

In this connection A suggests that there can be no tragedy in the Greek sense in the Hebrew tradition. Judaism, he insists, is too ethically developed for this. “The bond by which the individual becomes guilty is precisely [filial] piety, but the guilt that it thereby incurs has every possible esthetic amphiboly. One might promptly think that the people, who must have developed the profoundly tragic was the Jewish nation. For example, when it is said of Jehovah that he is a jealous God, that he visits the iniquities of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations, or when we hear those terrible curses in the Old Testament, one could easily be tempted to want to seek tragic material here. But Judaism is too ethically mature for that; even though they are terrible, Jehovah’s curses are also righteous punishment. It was not this way in Greece; the wrath of the gods has no ethical character, only esthetic ambiguity.”<sup>177</sup> Jehovah’s curses are, although terrible, a righteous punishment. Human beings get what they deserve. And yet, it seems to me that there are in the Old Testament stories that that may be considered tragic in Kierkegaard’s sense. One such story is the story of the fall. For it is impossible to call Adam and Eve guilty in an ethical sense. They sinned by eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. In other words, only by eating from that tree did they learn to distinguish between good and evil. The decision cannot have been made with such knowledge. Only in retrospect do they come to recognize their guilt. In this sense they are rather like Oedipus. But this is only a suggestion that invites development.

---

176 *EO1*, 146 / *SKS 2*, 146.

177 *EO1*, 150–151 / *SKS 2*, 149–150.

## 4

The interlude gives us further insight into the Symparanekromenoi. The first paragraph is one monstrous sentence. “Since it is at variance with the aims of our association to provide coherent works or larger unities, since it is not our intention to labor on a Tower of Babel that God in his righteousness can descend and destroy, since we, in our consciousness that such confusion justly occurred, acknowledge as characteristic of all human existence in its truth that it is fragmentary, that it is precisely this that distinguishes it from nature’s infinite coherence, that an individual’s wealth consists specifically in his capacity for fragmentary prodigality and what is the producing individual’s enjoyment is the receiving individual’s also, not the laborious and careful accomplishment or the tedious interpretation of this accomplishment but the production and the pleasure of the glinting transiency, which for the producer holds much more than the consummated accomplishment, since it is a glimpse of the idea and holds a bonus for the recipient, since its fulguration [*Fulguration*] stimulates his own productivity – since all this, I say, is at variance with our association’s inclination, indeed, since the periodic sentence just read must almost be regarded as a serious attack on the ejaculatory style in which the idea breaks forth without achieving a breakthrough, to which officiality is attached in our society – therefore, after having pointed out that my conduct still cannot be considered mutinous, inasmuch as the bond that holds this periodic sentence together is so loose that the parenthetical clauses therein strut aphoristically and willfully enough, I shall merely call to mind that my style has made no attempt to appear to be what it is not: revolutionary.”<sup>178</sup> It is a difficult sentence to digest. First of all there is an insistence that the production of complete works would be at odds with the character of the society. The society acknowledges the fragmentary character of all human endeavor. The fragment, the ruin are to be given preference over works that aim at perfection – and though this sentence is a grammatical whole, it is yet a sentence in which the clauses “strut around aphoristically,” call into question the unity of the sentence. This one sentence invites a study of the function of sentence length in the mod-

---

178 *EO1*, 151–152 / *SKS 2*, 150–151.

ern novel. I am thinking especially of the opening sentence of Hermann Broch's *The Death of Virgil*.<sup>179</sup>

Equally suggestive is the next paragraph: "Our society requires a renewal and rebirth at every single meeting and to that end requires that its intrinsic activity be rejuvenated by a new description of its productivity. Let us, then, designate our intention as a venture in fragmentary endeavor or the art of writing posthumous [*efterladte*, left behind] papers. A completely finished work is disproportionate to the poetizing personality; because of the disjointed and desultory character of unfinished papers, one feels a need to poetize the personality along with them. Unfinished papers are like a ruin, and what place of resort could be more natural for the buried? The art, then, is to produce skillfully the same effect, the same carelessness and fortuitousness, the same anacoluthic [changing the syntax in a sentence, i. e. fragile] thought process; the art is to evoke an enjoyment that is never present tense, but always has an element of the past and thus is present in the past."<sup>180</sup> The completed work stands in no relation to the creator. The fragment, like the ruin, however, is haunted by absence. Absence becomes present in a ruin, just as presence comes to be haunted by absence. A here makes a suggestive contribution to an understanding of the interest in fragments and ruins in romantic and modern art and literature.

---

179 "Stahlblau und leicht, bewegt von einem leisen, kaum merklichen Gegenwind, waren die Wellen des Adriatischen Meeres dem kaiserlichen Geschwader entgegengeströmt, als dieses, die mählich anrückenden Flachhügel der kalabrischen Küste zur Linken, dem Hafen Brundisium zusteuerte, und jetzt, da die sonnige, dennoch so todesahnende Einsamkeit der See sich ins friedvoll Freudige menschlicher Tätigkeit wandelte, da die Fluten, sanft überglänzt von der Nähe menschlichen Seins und Hausens, sich mit vielerlei Schiffen bevölkerten, mit solchen, die gleicherweise dem Hafen zustrebten, mit solchen, die aus ihm ausgelaufen waren, jetzt, da die braunseligen Fischerboote bereits Überall die kleinen Schutzmölen all der vielen Dörfer und Ansiedlungen längs der weißbespülten Ufer verließen, um zum abendlichen Fang auszuziehen, da war das Wasser beinahe spiegelglatt geworden; perlmuttern war darüber die Muschel des Himmels geöffnet, es wurde Abend, und man roch das Holzfeuer der Herdstätten, sooft die Töne des Lebens, ein Hämmern oder rein Ruf von dort hergeweht und herangetragen wurden." (Herman Broch *Der Tod des Vergil*, p. 9.)

180 *EO1*, 152 / *SKS 2*, 151.

## 5

We are now ready to turn to the final part of this venture in fragmentary endeavor, to A's invention of a modern Antigone. "Antigone is her name. I shall keep this name from the ancient tragedy, to which I shall hold for the most part, although from another angle everything will be modern. But first one comment. I am using a female character because I believe that a female nature will be best suited to show the difference. As a woman, she will have enough substantiality for the sorrow to manifest itself, but as one belonging to a reflective world she will have sufficient reflection to experience the pain."<sup>181</sup> As you learn from the supplement to the English edition, this modern Antigone is a figure of Kierkegaard himself. Consider these remarks by Kierkegaard: "No doubt I could bring my Antigone to an end if I let her be a man. He forsook his beloved because he could not keep her together with his private agony. In order to do it right, he had to turn his whole love into a deception against her, for otherwise she would have participated in his suffering in an utterly unjustifiable way. This outrage enraged the family: a brother, for example, stepped forward as an avenger; I would then have my hero fall in a duel."<sup>182</sup> The fact that Kierkegaard is figured by a heroine makes one think; consider the love-struck, androgynous Cherubino, whose voice Mozart gave to a woman. Is Cherubino, too, one of Kierkegaard's masks? This much is clear: the secret his Antigone carries with her figures the secret Kierkegaard felt himself to be carrying: "At an early age, before she had reached maturity, dark hints of this horrible secret had momentarily gripped her soul, until certainty hurled her with one blow into the arms of anxiety. Here at once I have a definition of the tragic in modern times, for an anxiety is a reflection and in that respect is essentially different from sorrow. Anxiety is the vehicle by which the subject appropriates sorrow and assimilates it. Anxiety is the motive power by which sorrow penetrates a person's heart. But the movement is not swift like that of an arrow; it is consecutive; it is not once and for all, but it is continually becoming. As a passionately erotic glance craves its subject, so anxiety looks cravingly upon sorrow."<sup>183</sup> By some accident this Antigone has discovered her father's

---

181 *EO1*, 153–154 / *SKS 2*, 152.

182 *EO1*, 541.

183 *EO1*, 154 / *SKS 2*, 153. The link between Kierkegaard himself and Antigone is also suggested by Walter Lowrie (*A Short Life of Kierkegaard*, pp. 76–78).

guilt. She is the only one who suspects; she does not even know whether her father knows. In order not to destroy the happiness of others, she keeps her suspicions, which later grow into certainty, to herself.

But there are suggestions that Antigone has also another motive. Her anxiety will not let go of her sorrow. From that sorrow she derives an odd satisfaction. "So it is with our Antigone. She is proud of her secret, proud that she has been selected in a singular way to save the honor and the glory of the lineage of Oedipus. When the grateful nation acclaim Oedipus with praise and thanksgiving, she feels her own significance, and her secret sinks deeper and deeper into her soul, ever more inaccessible to any living being."<sup>184</sup> A develops that sorrow further by letting Oedipus die. Thus Antigone is deprived of the only one she could perhaps have spoken to. This Antigone now falls in love. And yet she knows that she cannot share her secret with her lover. It would not be true to say that there is a conflict between her love for her father and her love for her lover. Rather there is pride at work, a pride that brings with it an unwillingness to reveal herself to her lover, a pride that precludes marriage.

We know that when A describes his Antigone as he does, Kierkegaard also is describing his own inability to get married to Regine Olsen. And yet does the modern Antigone justify him in any way? Is she in fact a tragic heroine? Could she not have gotten married? Undoubtedly, this would not have been nearly as interesting as the self-tortures she inflicts on herself. What keeps the modern Antigone from getting married is pride. And it is this pride that lets her become introverted. It is possible to see Kierkegaard's failure with Regine Olsen in just this way. And if so, Kierkegaard moves rather close to A. Kierkegaard himself had to struggle against such an interpretation: he was a good enough Christian to have to struggle against it. This leads to his own tortured explanations, suggesting that he received something like a divine call, something admittedly incommunicable and thus condemning the individual, who has received such a call, to silence, as Abraham is condemned to silence when he receives God's command to sacrifice Isaac.<sup>185</sup>

At this point we should consider how little it would take to convert this modern Antigone from a tragic into a comic heroine.

---

184 *EOI*, 157 / *SKS* 2, 156.

185 Cf. "Problema III" in *Fear and Trembling (FT)*, 82–120 / *SKS* 4, 172–207).

## 6. The Fellowship of the Dead

### 1

Last time we began our discussion of three essays joined by the fact that they are supposed to have been read or delivered to the Symparanekromenoi, this fellowship of buried lives, with “The Tragic in Ancient Drama, Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama.” Today I want to turn to the remaining two: to “Silhouettes” and “The Unhappiest One.” I should note that I prefer Lowrie’s “shadowgraphs” as a translation of the Danish to the Hongs’ “silhouettes.”

To begin with just a word about the stanzas that introduce these “Silhouettes”: how do they relate to what follows? Their mood seems very different from that of the essay. I am also somewhat surprised that the first has not been identified.<sup>186</sup> I suspect that it will turn out to be a reasonably well known poet. The reference seems to me to be to that cave where, according to the *Aeneid*, Dido, who had vowed to remain chaste after the death of her husband, succumbed to divine magic and made love to Aeneas.

Abgeschworen mag die Liebe immer seyn;  
Liebes-Zauber wiegt in dieser Höhle  
Die berauschte, überraschte Seele  
In Vergessenheit des Schwures ein.<sup>187</sup>

The English translation, to be sure, does not give us even a hint of the poetry of these lines. The mood here is not at all nihilistic.

Nor can this be said of the six lines that make up Lessing’s “Lied aus dem Spanischen”

Gestern liebt’ ich,  
Heute leid’ ich,  
Morgen sterb’ ich;  
Dennoch denk’ ich

---

186 Both the English and Danish editions state that the source of the first four lines has not yet been identified (*EO1*, 631; *SKS* K2–3, 164). The story of Dido and Aeneas is in fact referenced later on in “Silhouettes” (*EO1*, 197 / *SKS* 2, 193); cf. the discussion below.

187 *EO1*, 166 / *SKS* 2, 164.

Heut' und Morgen  
Gern an Gestern<sup>188</sup>

The three shadowgraphs are preceded by an introduction that is divided into two parts. The first celebrates the inevitable victory of night over day, time, and life. The Symparanekromenoi are in love with the night. I already pointed out that this celebration is a perversion of the traditional midsummer night festival, to which it relates in somewhat the same way as a black mass does to a mass. Consider once more the passage I cited already last time: "We celebrate in this hour the founding of our society, we rejoice anew that the happy occasion has repeated itself, that the longest day is over and night begins to triumph. We have waited all the day long; just a moment ago we sighed over its length, but now our despair is transformed into joy. To be sure, the victory is not great, and the preponderance of day will last for a long time, but that its domination has been broken does not escape our attention. Therefore, we do not postpone our celebration over the victory of the night until it is plain to all; we do not postpone it until the torpid bourgeois life reminds us that day is declining. No, as a young bride impatiently awaits the coming of night, so we longingly wait for the first onset of night, the first announcement of its coming victory, and the more we have been inclined to despair over our being able to hold out if the days were not shortened, the greater our joy and surprise."<sup>189</sup> There is an invocation of nature, developed in the following sentences, in terms of the natural sublime. "Yes, would that vortex, which is the world's core principle, even if people are not aware of it, but eat and drink, marry and propagate themselves with carefree industriousness, would that it would erupt with deep-seated resentment and shake off the mountains and the nations and the cultural works and man's clever inventions; would that it might erupt with the last terrible shriek that more surely than the trumpet of doom announces the downfall of everything; would that it might stir and spin the bare cliff on which we stand as light as thistledown before the breath in its nostrils."<sup>190</sup> This first part of the introduction closes with a celebration of the night, where Kierkegaard's words invite comparison with the night songs that are such a prominent part of German romantic poetry. Some of Schubert's best songs are settings of such songs. Here I only want to point out that

---

188 *Ibid.*

189 *EO1*, 167 / *SKS 2*, 165.

190 *EO1*, 168 / *SKS 2*, 166.

the Symparanekromenoi are drawn to a variant of the sublime, a variant that must be distinguished from the Kantian sublime, which demands to be thought in relation to a freedom bound to morality.<sup>191</sup> This sublime substitutes for morally bound freedom the abyss of the infinite.<sup>192</sup>

The second part of the introduction begins with an invocation of Lessing's famous distinction between art and poetry, one tied to space, the other to time, one of those distinctions that marks the epochal threshold occupied by the Enlightenment: "Since the time when Lessing defined the boundaries between poetry and art in his celebrated treatise *Laokoon*, it no doubt may be regarded as a conclusion recognized by all estheticians that the distinction between them is that art is in the category of space, poetry in the category of time, that art depicts repose, poetry motion. For this reason, the subject for artistic portrayal must have a quiet transparency so that the interior rests in the corresponding exterior. The less this is the case, the more difficult becomes the task of the artist, until the distinction asserts itself and teaches him that this is no task for him at all."<sup>193</sup> According to Lessing, Laocoön cannot be shown screaming because the rules of beauty forbid it. A continues this thought by suggesting that joy is far easier to depict artistically than pain, for joy is extroverted, pain introverted. I do not find this an altogether convincing remark, just as I do not find Lessing's division altogether convincing, but all too much of its time and its rejection of the rococo. A would not seem to have such reservations. "Joy is communicative, sociable, open, wishes to express itself. Sorrow is inclosingly reserved [*indessluttet*], silent, solitary, and seeks to return into itself."<sup>194</sup> Reflective sorrow resists artistic representation. In this respect it is not unlike the content of romantic art, which Hegel had argued resists artistic representation.<sup>195</sup> This tension draws the modern artist to the sublime.<sup>196</sup>

A goes on to focus the discussion on a particular kind of reflective sorrow: "Consequently, if the sorrow of an unhappy love is due to a deception, we have unconditionally a reflective sorrow, whether it con-

---

191 Cf. Immanuel Kant *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, *Werke*, vol. 5, pp. 257–260; 264–266.

192 Cf. Karsten Harries *The Meaning of Modern Art*, p. 45.

193 *EO1*, 169 / *SKS 2*, 167. On Kierkegaard's relation to Lessing, cf. Chapter 2.

194 *EO1*, 169 / *SKS 2*, 167.

195 Cf. *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, *Werke*, vol. 15, pp. 38–67.

196 On the modern sublime, cf. Jean-François Lyotard "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?"

tinues for a lifetime or the individual conquers it.”<sup>197</sup> “It is this reflective sorrow that I aim to single out and, as far as possible, have emerge in a few pictures. I call them silhouettes [*Skyggerids*], partly to suggest at once by the name that I draw them from the dark side of life and partly, because, like silhouettes, they are not immediately visible. If I pick up a silhouette, I have no impression of it, cannot arrive at an actual conception of it; only when I hold it up towards the wall and do not look at it directly but at what appears on the wall, only then do I see it. . . . If I look at a sheet of paper, it perhaps has nothing remarkable about it for immediate inspection, but as soon as I hold it up to the light of day and look through it, I discover the subtle interior picture, too psychical, as it were, to be seen immediately.”<sup>198</sup> Kierkegaard seems to be thinking here of a *Laterna magica* that projects drawings on a glass plate unto some wall. Plato’s cave also comes to mind:<sup>199</sup> to get at the essential I have to look through the exterior; this requires something like a spiritual perspective. The reference to the watermark would seem to have been addressed to Regine Olsen: the letters Kierkegaard wrote her were apparently on paper with an especially striking watermark.<sup>200</sup>

Why should the Symparanekromenoi be likened to knight-errants, embarked on a quest in search of sorrow? Why this interest in the secret sorrow of the other? Should the hidden reveal itself after all? Do we meet here with a nostalgia for communication? As there is something self-contradictory about a fellowship of buried lives, there is something self-contradictory about this quest.

## 2

The images that follow are all three “pictures” of reflective grief. The first of these shadowgraphs is Marie Beaumarchais, taken from Goethe’s *Clavigo*. Her story, as A tells us is brief: “Clavigo became engaged to her, then left her.”<sup>201</sup> This is the cause of her grief. But why grieve? Clavigo was a scoundrel and left her: should she not say good riddance? But love, A suggests, cannot accept deception. For Kierkegaard love is a

---

197 *EO1*, 172 / *SKS 2*, 169.

198 *EO1*, 172–173 / *SKS 2*, 170.

199 Cf. Plato *The Republic*, 514a–520a.

200 Cf. Hirsch’s annotation in Søren Kierkegaard *Entweder/Oder*, Erster Teil, p. xii, n. 158.

201 *EO1*, 177 / *SKS 2*, 174.

mutual self-revelation. Each gives him- or herself transparently to the other. Love has no secrets. Because of this, deception is for love an absolute paradox. It is a paradox, because if love was real, and Marie clearly thought it was, then there should have been no deception. But there was a deception. Was love then not real? This occasions the reflection.

Those around her, who did not at all love Clavigo, do not find the deception difficult to accept. But Marie finds it impossible to accept. On one hand she nourishes the hope that he was perhaps not a deceiver, will some day return and justify himself. Might there not have been some dark reason unknown to her that made it necessary for him to act as he did? Suppose he left her because he loved her no longer? Would it not have been a deception to stay? If Clavigo had died, she could sorrow. But he is still alive. How is she to understand him now? He is a riddle. Lacking the strength to break out of her reflections, she buries herself while still alive, and joins the fellowship of the *Symparanekromenoi*.

Once again the autobiographical element is evident: "He was no deceiver. What snatched him away, I do not know, I do not know that dark power, but it pained him personally, pained him deeply. He did not want to initiate me into his pain, therefore he pretended to be a deceiver. Indeed, if he had taken up with some other girl, then I would say he was a deceiver, then no power on earth would bring me to believe anything else, but that he has not done. He thinks perhaps that making himself appear to be a deceiver will diminish the pain for me, will arm me against him. Therefore he appears now and then with young girls, therefore he looked at me so mockingly the other day – to make me furious and thereby liberate me. No, surely he was no deceiver, and how could that voice deceive? It was so calm and yet so agitated; it sounded from an inwardness, the depth of which I could scarcely suspect, as if it were breaking a path through masses of rock. Can that voice deceive? What is the voice then – is it a stroke of the tongue, a noise that one can produce as one wishes? But it must have a home somewhere in the soul; it must have a birthplace. And that it did, in the innermost recess of his heart it had its home; there he loved me, there he loves me. To be sure, he had another voice also; it was cold, chilling; it could murder every joy in my soul, squelch every joyous thought, make even my kiss cold and abhorrent to me. Which was the true voice? He could deceive in every way, but this I feel – that tremulous voice in which his whole passion throbbed – that was no deceit; it is impossible. The other was a deception. Or

there were evil forces that gained control of him. No, he was no deceiver; that voice that has shackled me to him forever – that is no deception. A deceiver he was not, even though I never understood him.”<sup>202</sup> Marie resembles Regine Olsen, at least as Kierkegaard saw her, and just as she has a sister who defends Clavigo, so Regine had a sister, Cornelia, who defended Kierkegaard.<sup>203</sup> This makes it all the more remarkable that Kierkegaard should have named the girl in the “The Seducer’s Diary” Cordelia.<sup>204</sup>

### 3

The next shadowgraph is borrowed from *Don Giovanni*. This time the girl is Donna Elvira, a nun who has been seduced by the Don, who immediately leaves her. As a nun she is more spiritually developed than Marie Beaumarchais, and just because of this vulnerable to the seductive power of a Don Juan. By permitting herself to be seduced, she gave up everything that up to that time had meant something to her, gave up what had been her center, but not for a new center, but for the immediacy of enjoyment. Here there was no mutual self-revelation. And how could there have been, given what we have learned about Don Giovanni? The fleetingness of the encounter was only natural. But Elvira lost herself in the encounter. Leaving her, Don Juan leaves her nothing. And nothing now has significance for her except Don Juan, who having left, yet in another sense does not leave her. And so hate and love, hope and revenge mingle. His leaving was too obvious to be disguised. It cannot be interpreted in various ways. So how can she face up to the fact? Can she even blame him? He had not promised her anything, did not win her with a promise of marriage? What then does he owe her? And yet she needs him. To stand by herself she has to rid herself of him, has to hate him.

A goes on to imagine Elvira at later stages: “Here two possibilities become apparent – either to enter into ethical or religious categories or to keep her love for Giovanni. If she does the first, she is outside our interest; we will gladly have her enter a home for fallen women

202 *EO1*, 187–188 / *SKS 2*, 184.

203 Cf. Alastair Hannay *Kierkegaard*, pp. 158–159.

204 The possible connection between Regine’s sister “Cornelia” and the “Cordelia” of “The Seducer’s Diary” has also been suggested by Joakim Garff in his *Søren Kierkegaard*, pp. 189–190.

or whatever else she wants. But this probably will be difficult for her, because in order for that to be possible she must first despair; she has known the religious, and the second time it makes great demands.”<sup>205</sup> Again the autobiographical significance is evident: “A third possibility is unthinkable; that she could be able to find consolation in another man’s love would be even more dreadful than the most dreadful. So for her own sake, therefore, she must love Don Giovanni; it is self-defense that bids her do it. And this is the stimulus of reflection that forces her to stare at this paradox: whether she is able to love him, even though he deceived her. Every time despair is about to seize her, she takes refuge in the memory of Don Giovanni’s love, and in order really to feel comfortable in this refuge, she is tempted to think that he is no deceiver, even though she does this in various ways. A woman’s dialectic is remarkable, and only the person who has the opportunity to observe it can imitate it, whereas the greatest dialectician who ever lived could speculate himself crazy trying to produce it.”<sup>206</sup> A imagines her at a still later stage: “The soul, too, requires sustenance. She is young, and yet the reserves of her life are used up, but from this it does not follow that she will die. In this respect, she is concerned every day about the next day. She cannot stop loving him, and yet he deceived her, but if he deceived her, then her love had indeed lost its nourishing power. Yes, if he had not deceived her, if a higher power had torn him away, then she would have been as well provided as any girl could wish, for the memory of Don Giovanni was a good deal more than many a living husband.”<sup>207</sup>

## 4

The third silhouette is provided by Margarete, from Goethe’s *Faust*, an innocent, quite ordinary, middle class girl. And yet innocence and ordinariness are inevitably destroyed by the contact with Faust: Faust has to develop her and yet, just as she becomes more interesting she comes to interest Faust less. For it is not the interesting that Faust seeks in her. He wants to escape from the nothingness of doubt, escape into immediacy: “Faust is a demonic figure, just like Don Juan, but a superior one. Sen-

---

205 *EO1*, 198 / *SKS 2*, 194.

206 *EO1*, 199 / *SKS 2*, 194–195.

207 *EO1*, 201–202 / *SKS 2*, 197.

sciousness does not acquire importance for him until he has lost a whole previous world, but the consciousness of this loss is not blotted out; it is always present, and therefore he seeks in the sensuous not so much pleasure as distraction. His doubting soul finds nothing in which it can rest, and now he grasps at erotic love [*Elskov*], not because he believes in it but because it has an element of presentness in which there is a momentary rest and a striving that diverts and that draws attention away from the nothingness of doubt.”<sup>208</sup>

What he seeks, A suggests, is “immediacy of the spirit” – where we should ask ourselves just what such immediacy might mean. “Just as ghosts in the underworld, when a living being fell into their hands, sucked his blood and lived as long as this blood warmed and nourished them, so Faust seeks an immediate life whereby he will be rejuvenated and strengthened. And where can this better be found than in a young girl, and how can he more completely imbibe this than in the embrace of erotic love? Just as the Middle Ages had tales of sorcerers who knew how to prepare a rejuvenating potion and used the heart of an innocent child for it, so this is the strengthening his emaciated soul needs, the only thing that can satisfy him for a moment.”<sup>209</sup> We should recall here what Kierkegaard had said about his own ghostly nature, commenting on his inability to marry: “About me (and this is at once the good and the bad in me) there is something rather ghostly, which accounts for the fact that no one can put up with me who has to see me in everyday intercourse and so comes into a real relationship with me.”<sup>210</sup> No doubt Regine Olsen was an intended reader of this passage. Kierkegaard, too, must have dreamed of finding rest in the immediacy of love. “In his way it stirs a Faust; it beckons his restless soul like an island of peace in the calm ocean. That it is ephemeral, no one knows better than Faust; he does not believe in it any more than in anything else, but that it exists, of that he assures himself in the embrace of erotic love. Only the plenitude of innocence and childlikeness can refresh him for a moment.”<sup>211</sup> What Margarete is, A tells us, she owes to Faust: “He is a doubter, but as such he has all the elements of the positive within himself, for otherwise he would be a sorry doubter. He lacks the point of conclusion. And therefore all the elements become

---

208 *EO1*, 206 / *SKS 2*, 201.

209 *Ibid.*

210 Cited in Walter Lowrie *A Short Life of Kierkegaard*, p. 140.

211 *EO1*, 207 / *SKS 2*, 202.

negative. She, however, has the point of conclusion, has childlikeness and innocence. Therefore nothing is easier for him than to equip her. He has learned from experience that what he talked about as doubt often impressed others as positive truth."<sup>212</sup> But once Faust has developed her, it seems almost inevitable that he should leave her. This leaving has to threaten the person she now has become, for what she has become she has become in relation to Faust: and now that he is gone, should she be nothing?

## 5

How do the three silhouettes compare? That all three are versions of Regine Olsen seems obvious, just as the male villains are variations of Kierkegaard. Each silhouette offers us a different interpretation of love. In the first, love implies mutual transparency. In genuine love the lovers find themselves in a more or less symmetrical relationship. Immediacy, sensuality, does not really figure in this understanding of love. By breaking the engagement, Clavigo calls into question the presupposed love, as he challenges us to question whether this understanding of love is at all tenable. Transparency now gives way to opacity. And so Marie is left wondering how to interpret what happened: is Clavigo really a deceiver? Her problem is first of all a problem of interpretation.

Elvira is torn not between interpretations (the facts are too clear for that), but between moods, not knowing whether to hate or love. Love here has little to do with mutual transparency. The first stanza that introduces the Silhouettes fits Elvira (does the second fit Margarete?). Love here means entering the Mountain of Venus, that kingdom whose first born, we have been told, is Don Juan. As a nun, Elvira is far more spiritually developed than the Don. Once she had found her center in God. But just because of this she was vulnerable to the seductive power of a Don Juan. Not that this could have given her life a new center. The relationship had to end. Left to Elvira are her hate and her love. The reference to Dido is telling, for Kierkegaard thought of Regine Olsen as *regina*, i. e. in the image of the betrayed Carthaginian queen, who even in the underworld turns away from Aeneas. "Just as in the underworld Dido herself turns away from Aeneas, who was un-

---

212 *EO1*, 209 / *SKS 2*, 204.

faithful to her, so she certainly will not turn away from him but will face him even more coldly than Dido.”<sup>213</sup>

Margarete finally is the inverse. Still half a child, she is innocent. What attracts her to Faust, A tells us, is precisely his superior spirituality. In Faust her life did gain a center, but it was a false center. Faust made her in a sense, and yet by leaving her unmade what he had made. Her love was absolute, unconditional, and yet he was a deceiver. All she is left with is her grief.

## 6

In the last essay, “The Unhappiest One,” these themes are further developed. With reference to Hegel<sup>214</sup> A tells us there that unhappiness lies in having one’s center outside oneself. “The unhappy one is the person who in one way or another has his ideal, the substance of his life, the plenitude of his consciousness, his essential nature, outside himself. But in being absent, one obviously can be in either past or future time. The whole territory of the unhappy consciousness is thereby adequately circumscribed. For this limitation, we thank Hegel, and now, since we are not only philosophers who view this kingdom at a distance, we shall as natives consider more carefully the various stages contained therein.”<sup>215</sup> What A has to say here is in keeping with the traditional understanding of unhappiness: the unhappy person lacks satisfaction, where satisfaction is defined as not lacking in anything essential. A continues by pointing out that it is possible to be absent from oneself in the past or in the future. An individual unable to accept the present because of a memory of something wonderful and seemingly essential, but forever lost, would be unhappy in relation to the past, an individual who always hoped for something wonderful to happen that would change his fortune and by such hope was prevented from taking an active part in the present, would be unhappy in relation to the future. Thus a person sacrificing a full life in this world to his hope for the world to come, would be unhappy with respect to the future, although only in a sense, for as A points out, he would find a kind of happiness in this: “A person who hopes for eternal life is certainly in a sense an unhappy individuality, in-

---

213 *EO1*, 197 / *SKS 2*, 193.

214 Cf. *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, “Das unglückliche Bewußtsein,” *Werke*, vol. 3, pp. 163–177.

215 *EO1*, 222 / *SKS 2*, 216.

sofar as he renounces the present; but strictly speaking he is nevertheless not unhappy, because he is present to himself in his hope and does not come into conflict with the particular elements of finiteness. If, however, he cannot become present to himself in hope but loses his hope, then hopes again, etc., then he is absent from himself, not only in present, but also in future time, and thus we have a form of unhappiness. If we remember the recollecting individuality, we find the same thing. If he can become present to himself in past time, then strictly speaking he is not unhappy; but if he cannot do this, but is continually absent from himself in past time, then we have a form of unhappiness.”<sup>216</sup> The future, A points out, in that it can become the present is, in that sense, closer to us than the past. So the unhappiness of such a person would be less than the unhappiness of someone who remembered and was unable to get over what he had lost. “Hope’s unhappy individualities never have the pain of recollection’s. The hoping individualities always have a more pleasant disappointment. Therefore, the unhappiest one will always have to be sought among recollection’s unhappy individualities.”<sup>217</sup> More unhappy than either, however, is the person who, torn between hope and memory, is being prevented from being present in his hope by his memory, from being present in his memory by his hope. “But we shall go on. We shall imagine a combination of the two forms described, unhappy forms in the strictest sense. The unhappy hoping individuality could not become present to himself in his hope; likewise the unhappy recollecting individual. The only combination possible is one in which it is recollection that prevents him from becoming present in his hope and it is hope that prevents him from becoming present in is recollection.”<sup>218</sup> Again Kierkegaard would seem to be speaking of his relationship to Regine Olsen. “This is due, on the one hand, to his continually being disappointed, but he discovers that this disappointment occurs not because his objective is pushed further ahead but because he is past his goal, because it has already been experienced and thus has passed over into recollection. On the other hand, he is continually recollecting that for which he should hope, because he has already encompassed the future in thought, has already experienced it in thought, and recollects what he has experienced instead of hoping for it. Thus, what he is hoping for lies behind him; what he recollects

---

216 *EO1*, 223 / *SKS* 2, 217.

217 *EO1*, 225 / *SKS* 2, 218.

218 *Ibid.*

lies ahead of him. His life is not backwards, but is turned the wrong way in two directions. He will soon perceive his trouble even though he does not comprehend the reason for it.”<sup>219</sup> Once again A offers us what would seem to be a self-description of Kierkegaard himself.

Having been given a rather general discussion of unhappiness, we are made witness of a contest in which the unhappiest is chosen. Recall the beginning of this peroration: A tells of a grave in England, apparently in Worcester cathedral, that bears only the inscription “The Unhappiest One,” *Miserrimus*. When it was opened, we are told, no corpse was found. How are we to imagine this unhappiest one? Let us briefly look at A’s candidates:

6.1: A woman whose lover has been faithless. Her unhappiness is over something that has happened. The center of her life lies in the past, in this sense outside her. But at least it has a center.<sup>220</sup>

6.2: Next comes Niobe who lost everything, all her children, at one stroke. Here again there is the memory of what she has lost. She, too, has her center in the past. But since her loss is more profound she stands higher than the first candidate.<sup>221</sup>

6.3: Next come Oedipus and Antigone. Here, too, we can leave them with their memories.<sup>222</sup>

6.4: Next comes Job, who slowly lost everything the Lord had given him. But at least he had possessed it. This to be sure is not the Job to whom the Lord in the end restores twofold all he had lost. Earlier I asked: is Job a tragedy? Can there be a religious tragedy?<sup>223</sup>

6.5: Next comes the father of the prodigal son, who hopes for a return of what he has lost, or rather is losing. What distinguishes him is the uncertainty of the loss, mingled with hope.<sup>224</sup>

6.6: He is followed by a Christ-like figure, who also recalls St. Peter and perhaps Cain.<sup>225</sup> Here we have not a real loss, but rather a failure to live up to a self-chosen ideal. He wanted to be a martyr, but “actuality was too heavy for him.” And so he denied the Lord and himself. And yet he became a martyr, a modern martyr, being consumed by a slow fire within.

---

219 *EO1*, 225 / *SKS 2*, 218–219.

220 *EO1*, 227 / *SKS 2*, 220.

221 *Ibid.*

222 *Ibid.*

223 *EO1*, 227–228 / *SKS 2*, 221.

224 *EO1*, 228 / *SKS 2*, 221.

225 *Ibid.*

6.7: Again a woman appears, rather like the first.<sup>226</sup> Her lover has been faithless. But in this case there is doubt: was he really faithless. The event is ambiguous and this ambiguity opens a door to hope. And yet the ambiguity is too great for hope to gain the upper hand. "He was a riddle." Once again we have a figure for Regine Olsen.

6.8: And finally we come to the Unhappiest One,<sup>227</sup> presumably a figure of Kierkegaard himself. Completely caught between past and future, between memory and hope, he is utterly beside himself. He hopes for what should be remembered, he remembers what should be hoped for. Imagine someone who longs for childhood and its remembered innocence, longs for immediacy, a Faust, e. g. who still hopes to recover what he has lost in Gretchen. Such a person remembers what he hopes for. His hope will of course be defeated. He cannot regain lost innocence again, cannot undo the destructive work of reflection. The evolution of spirit is irreversible. That goes for the individual; that also goes for the culture. On the other hand he cannot hope for any further development, because he has already reflected so much about the possibilities open to him that they all seem stale repetitions of what has already been explored, variations of the same meaningless theme. He has his past ahead of him and his future behind him. Time for him therefore has no real meaning, for he has no real future, no real past.

And yet does this not come very close to what has traditionally been claimed for happiness? "Farewell, then, you the unhappiest one! But what am I saying – 'the unhappiest'? I ought to say 'the happiest,' for this is indeed precisely the gift of fortune that no one can give himself. See, language breaks down, and thought is confused, for who indeed is the happiest but the unhappiest and who the unhappiest but the happiest, and what is life but madness, and faith but foolishness, and hope but a staving off of the evil day, and love but vinegar in the wound."<sup>228</sup> The unhappiest is the happiest because in him past and future have cancelled each other. Everything he will do, has already been done by him, we are told. He is Sisyphus, Tantalus, endlessly repeating the same meaningless act. This invites talk of the eternal recurrence.<sup>229</sup> Time has become a ring.

---

226 *EO1*, 228–229 / *SKS 2*, 222.

227 *EO1*, 229 / *SKS 2*, 222.

228 *EO1*, 230 / *SKS 2*, 223.

229 The relation between Kierkegaard's concept of repetition and Nietzsche's eternal recurrence has also been explored by Niels Nymann Eriksen *Kierkegaard's*

The thought of the eternal recurrence is both a terrifying and an intoxicating thought, suggesting at one and the same time the height of despair (Sisyphus and Tantalus) and the life of the blessed. It shares this ambiguity with the thought of immediacy: both present themselves to us as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Consider immediacy: it suggests both great fullness and complete emptiness. There is a relationship between the two: the individual who exists immediately is so much at one with himself that he cannot even be said to exist in any meaningful way. The self, we can say has drowned in immediacy. As long as the individual exists as a conscious temporal being, i. e., as long as he exists, he will be dissatisfied, not at one with himself, in this sense unhappy to some degree. He finds the happiness that he is dreaming of only in death, but then of course he is no longer, is totally absent from himself. As A understands it, the idea of the happy life is a paradox. The time of such happiness would be the eternal recurrence, which shows us two faces, one pointing to heaven, the other to hell. But, to reiterate, the eternal recurrence is a paradox.

With this we return to the idea of repetition, which shows us similarly two faces: one tied to happiness, the other to boredom.

---

*Category of Repetition*, pp. 136–164, and Gilles Deleuze *Difference and Repetition*, pp. 5–11.

## 7. Kitsch

### 1

Today we turn to the first of two essays that have as their common theme the interesting. The interesting gives us in a way the key to the aesthetic life as A understands it. Once you have understood the interesting, much of the rest falls into place.<sup>230</sup> This gives especially the second of the two essays, “The Rotation of Crops” its special importance. But today I want to consider only the first.

“The First Love” is divided into three parts: A begins with a general discussion of the key concept of the *occasion*. I shall spend quite a bit of time on it. Next follows a discussion of the particular occasion that led to the writing of this review of Scribe’s play *The First Love*. I shall skip over it here. Then follows the main part, which gives A an occasion to discuss the concept of “*the first*” and to develop a theory of *sentimentality*. It is that theory that may be read as a theory of Kitsch, although that word had not yet been coined. It is then on these three concepts, the occasion, the first, and sentimentality that I want to focus.

The concept of the occasion is closely linked to that of the interesting, addressed more fully in the following essay. “The expression ‘invocation of the muse’ can occasion a misunderstanding. To invoke the muse may signify for one thing that I invoke the muse; for another, that the muse invokes me. Any author who is either so naïve as to believe that everything depends on an honest will, on industry and effort, or so shameless as to offer for sale the products of the spirit will not be wanting in ardent invocation or brash forwardness. But not much is achieved thereby, for what Wessel once said still holds concerning the god of taste ‘whom all invoke,’ that he ‘so rarely comes.’ But if we interpret the expression to mean that it is the muse who invokes – I shall not say us, but those concerned – then the matter acquires a different meaning. Whereas the authors who invoke the muse also embark without her coming, those last described, on the other hand, are in another

---

230 The centrality of the concept of the interesting in *Either/Or*, as well as in Kierkegaard’s oeuvre more generally, has been stressed by Walter Rehm *Kierkegaard und der Verführer*, esp. Chapter 4, “Die Kategorie des Interessanten.”

dilemma, in that they need an extra element for an inner decision to become an outer decision; this element is what one must call the occasion."<sup>231</sup> But let me anticipate: the interesting requires an occasion. A spider, the coughing of a neighbor, sweat running down a conductor's forehead, all these may become occasions for a cultivation of the interesting, occasions on which to exercise your inventiveness. The occasion is what ties inspiration to reality. "Anyone who has ever had leaning toward productivity has certainly noticed that it is a little accidental external circumstance that becomes the occasion for the actual producing. Only the authors who in one way or another have made a final purpose into their inspiration will perhaps deny this. This, however, to their own injury, for they are thereby deprived of the extreme poles of all true and sound productivity."<sup>232</sup> The occasion may not result in the creation of a work of art; it may result in no more than a daydream. In itself the occasion is quite insignificant, perhaps just an accidental happening: say a chance encounter in some railroad station, say in Mannheim. A train going by in the other direction: In it you see someone in a green sweater. When I was fourteen I made such an encounter the center of an imagined life, at least for 15 minutes. Although there is a sense in which that encounter has stayed with me.

A points out that all inspiration depends on some occasion: "Inspiration and the occasion belong inseparably together; it is a combination frequently seen in the world: the great one, the exalted, always has in his company an agile little person. Such a person is the occasion, a person to whom one generally would not tip one's hat, who does not dare to open his mouth when he is in high society but sits silent with a mischievous smile and inwardly regales himself without divulging what he is smiling about or that he knows how important, how indispensable he is; still less would he become involved in an argument about it, for he knows very well that it does not help and that every occasion is used only to humiliate him. The occasion always has this equivocal character, and it is of no more use to want to deny this, to want to free oneself from this thorn in the flesh, than to want to place the occasion on the throne, for it looks very foolish in purple and with scepter in hand, and it is immediately obvious that it was not born to rule."<sup>233</sup> The occasion allows the idea to connect with reality. "So the occasion is

---

231 *EO1*, 233 / *SKS 2*, 227.

232 *Ibid.*

233 *EO1*, 237 / *SKS 2*, 231.

simultaneously the most significant and the most insignificant, the highest and the lowest, the most important and the most unimportant. Without the occasion nothing at all occurs, and yet the occasion has no part at all in what occurs. The occasion is the final category, the essential category of transition from the sphere of the idea to actuality. Logic should bear this in mind. It can immerse itself as much as it wishes in immanent thinking, plunge from nothing down into the most concrete form, it never reaches the occasion and therefore never reaches actuality either.”<sup>234</sup>

It is easy to see how a film might be constructed in this way. Some of you may be familiar with the by now quite dated film, *Last Year at Marienbad*. The filmmaker, Resnais, himself points out that the film deals with a reality the hero creates out of his own words, a reality that makes it difficult to even ask what in the film’s fiction is supposed to be truth, what fiction. I mention this rather than some other film because twice, when I was doing research, if that is indeed the right word, for my book on the Bavarian rococo church, I happened to find myself prevented from seeing the spaces that I had come to see by the fact that that film was just being shot in these very spaces, the Amalienburg in the park of Munich’s Nymphenburg castle and the entrance hall of the castle in Schleissheim, which for the film had been made into a hotel lobby. These chance happenings, which let me see something I had not come and had not expected to see, then provide the occasion for these remarks. That does not yet make them interesting.

But let me turn to the film: When the hero (X) and the heroine (A) first meet, he tries to convince her that he has already seen her last year in Marienbad; when she denies this, we seem to have but another case of mistaken identity. His insistence that he has seen her before, that their meeting is in a sense a repetition, this suggestion that they are tied together by a common history, is an attempt to lift what would appear to be just a chance encounter out of the realm of the arbitrary and thus to give it a greater significance. This attempt becomes increasingly successful until in the end she is his, not, however, in the sense that he has actually seduced her, but in the sense that he has fully integrated her into his dreams. And does something like that not also happen in “The Seducer’s Diary”? She then is a theme, the occasion that inspires him to create a set of variations. The film comes to an end when he has found a satisfactory variation.

---

234 *EO1*, 238 / *SKS 2*, 231–232.

Let me just briefly sketch the last of these variations: After a rather violent rape scene, the hero is heard off-screen: “No. no, no! (violently:) *That’s wrong...* (calmer:) *It wasn’t by force...*”<sup>235</sup> A little later he is at work on a new variation: “*In the middle of the night...everything was asleep in the hotel...we meet in the park...the way we used to... You were standing in front of me, waiting, unable to take a step or turn back either. (A pause.) You stood there, straight, motionless, your arms alongside you, wrapped in some kind of long, dark cape...maybe black.*”<sup>236</sup> He tries to persuade her to leave with him. A refuses to do so. The scene ends in a scream by her. “*The park of this hotel was a kind of garden à la française without any trees or flowers, without any foliage...Gravel, stone, marble and straight lines marked out rigid spaces, surfaces without mystery. It seemed at first to be impossible to get lost here...at first glance...down straight paths, between the statues with frozen gestures and granite slabs, where you were now already getting lost, alone with me.*”<sup>237</sup> X of course can never really possess A, can never really take her with him. For in the end that real person must remain hidden, is no more than an occasion, just as he has to remain X.

One might ask to what extent love always involves such a poetizing that substitutes for the real person a fiction. This question challenges any understanding of love that would have the lovers be transparently related to one another. In *8 1/2* Fellini treats this theme rather differently – although I saw this film quite some time ago and may not remember it very well – but, if I remember correctly, in that film Fellini makes the hero’s wife the only person strong enough to resist being reduced to a mere occasion. She seems disturbingly real.

It should be evident that whenever an individual is treated as an occasion, there can be no real communication. Real communication presupposes that we allow the other person to be him- or herself. But just this I refuse to do when the other becomes no more than an occasion to me. The aesthetic individual, even when with others, remains alone. In this respect there is a relationship between the aesthete and the knight of faith. Think of Abraham, having returned from the land of Moriah, sitting once again at the dinner table with Sarah and Isaac.

---

235 Alain Robbe-Grillet *Last Year at Marienbad*, p. 147.

236 Alain Robbe-Grillet *Last Year at Marienbad*, p. 149.

237 Alain Robbe-Grillet *Last Year at Marienbad*, p. 165.

## 2

Having attempted to give you a first understanding of what is meant by an occasion, let me turn now to some of the things A actually says in the first pages of “The First Love.” “The occasion is always the accidental, and the prodigious paradox is that the accidental is absolutely just as necessary as the necessary. In the ideal sense, the occasion is not the accidental, as, for example, when I think the accidental in the logical sense, but the occasion is the accidental in the sense of fetishism, and yet in this accidentality it is the necessary.”<sup>238</sup> Of special interest are the two sentences that precede this quotation: “It has pleased the gods to link together the greatest contradictions in this way. This is a secret implicit in actuality – an offense to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks.”<sup>239</sup> The last is a reference to Paul’s words about preaching Christ crucified.<sup>240</sup>

Objectively speaking the occasion is the accidental, something contingent. But around this the inspired individual constructs his visions, his fictions, his dreams. The occasion is the foundation, presupposed by the structure. In this sense it is the necessary.

When A writes, that the occasion is as necessary as the necessary, the second “necessary” should be understood in an aesthetic sense. A work of art requires that every part of the work make a necessary contribution to the whole. A part that does not make such a contribution, but could in this sense just as well be left out, is from this point of view unnecessary and therefore bad. The same applies to these structures erected on the base of the occasion. They should have the same necessity as the work of art. And now we can see more clearly what it means to live an aesthetic life: it means to live life as if it were such a work of art or perhaps as a string of such works.

The work of art derives its significance from the creativity of its author. And yet the author cannot emancipate himself from his situation altogether. He is tied to it. And what ties him, the link, is precisely the occasion. And yet the artist succeeds only to the extent that he successfully integrates the occasion into his work in such a way that it no longer seems accidental and external to it.

---

238 *EO1*, 234 / *SKS* 2, 228.

239 *Ibid.*

240 1 Cor 1:23.

In several ways A places his own review under the category of the occasion, not just by telling us in some detail just what occasioned it, but by inviting us to see the relationship of review to critique as a relationship of occasion to aesthetic construction.

This would appear to be a play of which A does not really think all that much: “When one is jolted on a poor country road whenever at one moment the carriage hits a stone and at another the horses are stuck in the brush, there is no good opportunity to sleep. But if the road is level and easy, then one can really have time and opportunity to look around – but also, less disturbed, to fall asleep. So it is in modern drama. Everything happens so easily and quickly that the spectator, if he does not pay a little attention, misses a great deal. It is certainly true that an older five-act comedy and a modern five-act comedy last just as long, but there is always the question, whether just as much takes place. To pursue this exploration further might be interesting, but not in this review; it could be important to demonstrate this in more detail in Scribe’s dramas, but I believe that the more precise discussion of the little masterpiece that is the object of the present discussion will be sufficient. I much prefer to dwell on the present play, since it cannot be denied that in some of Scribe’s other dramas there is a lack of perfect correctness since the situations drag and the dialogue is one-sidedly garrulous. *The First Love*, however, is a flawless play, so consummate that it alone is bound to make Scribe immortal.”<sup>241</sup> That remark, however, should be compared with the following: “As is known, the play ends with Emmeline’s turning away from Charles, extending her hand to Rinville, and saying ‘It was a mistake; I confused the past with the future.’ Now, if the play is moralizing in the finite sense, as it is probably generally understood to be, then it is the poet’s intention to depict in Emmeline a childish, mixed-up girl who has the fixed idea that she loved no one but Charles but who now knows better, is healed of her sickness, makes a sensible match with Mr. Rinville, and lets the spectator hope for the best for her future, that she will become a diligent housewife etc., etc. If this is the intention then *The First Love* is changed from a masterpiece to a theatrical triviality, on the assumption that the poet has somewhat motivated her improvement. Since that is not the case, the play, regarded as a whole, becomes a mediocre play, and it must be lamented that the brilliant details in it are wasted.”<sup>242</sup> But

---

241 EO1, 248 / SKS 2, 241.

242 EO1, 255 / SKS 2, 247–248.

what then lets A call it a classic, bound to make Scribe immortal? Does this depend on A's own creativity?

## 3

But let me turn to the second concept I wanted to discuss, the concept of the "first." As we shall see in more detail next time, the interesting demands the novel, the first. This would seem to apply also to love: to be interesting a love must be our first love. This, at any rate, is precisely the conviction of Emmeline, the heroine of Scribe's play. This conviction, coupled with her infatuation as an eight year old girl with a boy whom she has not seen since, makes it impossible for her to be in love with anyone except that boy. The fact is of course that she does not really know who she is in love with. The boy presumably has changed, he has grown up. She knows only accidental facts about him: his name especially: she is in love with Charles and no one else. There are also signs, such as a certain ring. Anyone who appears with the right name and the proper signs is accepted as her first, her true and only love, and in the play it turns out to be Rinville, who is impersonating Charles.

Emmeline's belief in the importance of first love totally blinds her to the reality of who it is she is encountering. She does not care who he is, as long as he is Charles. In other words, the real person is once again only an occasion to which she fastens her own dreams. A here is poking fun at the superficiality of so many human encounters.

And yet, is A himself not in certain ways like Emmeline? The difference between her romanticism and his aestheticism is not so much that she is more naive than A, although she is. More important is what they have in common: they reduce persons to mere occasions, but A does this as a program. Thus he will say in the next essay that we should not get married, should not even have friends.<sup>243</sup> Emmeline, on the other hand, would insist that she knows the meaning of love, knows that such love will sustain a marriage. She is not at all aware that what she is taking to be reality is only an illusion. If anyone were to suggest to her that her relationship to the supposed Charles is insubstantial she would object violently.

---

243 *EO1*, 295; 299 / *SKS 2*, 284; 285.

Emmeline, as A suggests, shares her belief in the importance of first love with many romantics. The same is true of her tendency to use the other as little more than an occasion. Thus anyone who sees love, in the manner of Tristan and Isolde, as a way of losing oneself in the immediacy of love treats the other as a mere occasion. As a person the other becomes unimportant. To some extent that is true of Faust's love of Gretchen.

The notion of the first implies a denial of boredom, where the foundation of boredom is repetition. This the first denies. Thus the romantic says: one loves only once. The first is thus understood not so much numerically, i. e. quantitatively, as qualitatively. A good romantic will always have to say, my present love is my first love, even if, as A suggests, the lover is a widower, bringing five children into the marriage.<sup>244</sup> And the same is true of her. Still, it will be their first love.

The idea of first love is closely tied to that of election. The lover and the beloved were destined for each other (see Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften* [*Elective Affinities*]).<sup>245</sup> When we are honest we all have to acknowledge that the fact that we married or fell in love with this or that person is pretty much due to an accident. There was no doubt an occasion, but the occasion is the accidental. But just this cannot satisfy a real romantic. And perhaps it is not only a concern for the interesting that lets someone in love insist on the non-accidental nature of the encounter. There would seem to be something legitimate about such insistence on the uniqueness of our love: to love is to place the be-

---

244 *EO1*, 254/ *SKS* 2, 247.

245 In volume two of *Either/Or* Judge William explicitly draws on Goethe's novel in order to exemplify the way in which first love perceives the lovers to be destined for each other: "What we are speaking of here is what Goethe in *Wahlverwandtschaften* has so artistically first intimated to us in the imagery of nature in order to make it real [*realisere*] later in the world of spirit, except that Goethe endeavored to motivate this drawing power through a series of factors (perhaps in order to show the difference between the life of the spirit and the life of nature) and has not emphasized the haste, the enamored impatience and determination with which the two affinities seek each other. And is it not indeed beautiful to imagine that two beings are intended for each other! How often do we not have an urge to go beyond the historical consciousness, a longing, a homesickness for the primeval forest that lies behind us, and does not this longing acquire a double significance when it joins to itself the conception of another being whose home is also in that region?" (*EO2*, 20 / *SKS* 3, 29). For Kierkegaard's relation to Goethe more generally, cf. Carl Roos *Kierkegaard og Goethe*.

loved beyond comparison. As someone said about the appreciation of a genuine work of art: comparisons become odious. To the lover the beloved ceases to be one of many. As lover I am precisely not related to the other as first of all a person, but as this person. This is what places the lover above (or below) morality. The particular here is higher (or lower) than the universal.<sup>246</sup>

Here it is love that opens me to the uniqueness of the other, not love that establishes it. But an Emmeline can never love in the former sense. Her insistence that the lover conform to some fixed idea on her part makes such openness impossible. It is this fixed idea that blocks a real openness to the other. In a sense such sentimental love idealizes in that it obscures the other with an idea. But to so idealize the other is to do him or her an injustice. It reduces the person into an occasion and thus makes true communication impossible. It must, however, be admitted that quite often an individual will not mind such idealization, will take refuge in the ideal that has been constructed. But in such cases we always have an individual who refuses to be a self. He or she shifts the responsibility for having to be something to the other person. That other person endows him or her with an essence. This is the case with A's Gretchen.

#### 4

Emmeline's belief in her first love illuminates a wider phenomenon that A calls sentimentality. What is sentimentality? Once more let us return to Emmeline. Emmeline is caught in a net of illusions. She lacks the distance necessary to see these illusions as illusions. This distinguishes her from A. Indeed, she has to run away from recognizing her illusions as such, for this would force her to face reality in its everyday dreariness. Her illusions cast an idealizing veil over reality.

The need for this kind of illusion arises whenever an individual finds himself insufficiently claimed by the world, bored with it. Things and persons threaten to lose their special significance. The world of the bored is one in which everything is more or less equivalent, *gleichgült-*

---

246 In this respect love echoes the paradox of faith, which Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling* defines in similar terms: "Faith is namely this paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal" (*FT*, 55 / *SKS* 4, 149, *et passim*). Likewise, in *Philosophical Fragments* Johannes Climacus describes earthly love as an (imperfect) analogy to faith (*PF*, 25 / *SKS* 4, 233).

*fig.*<sup>247</sup> Such an existence lacks genuine emotions. Sentimentality then does not mean an excess of sentiment. Quite the opposite: it is born of a deficiency. When an individual is no longer able to desire, he or she desires desire. There is thus a relationship between sentimentality so understood and pornography. Where the individual finds himself unable to love, he loves love. More precisely, what is enjoyed is not so much a certain object or person, but a certain mood or emotion, even though, or rather just because there is no object or person warranting the emotion.

Thus we meet with the phenomenon of religion turning sentimental. Here the mood of being religious is sought in the absence of an encounter with a living God. Oswald Spengler thus distinguished between religion and religiosity. Our modern religion he considered religiosity born of a desire for something lacking.<sup>248</sup>

Similarly love is sentimental when what matters is the mood of love rather than the encounter with another individual. Yet even when the other is present, love may be said to be sentimental, when the other person provides no more than an occasion for sentiment. For the sake of self-enjoyment sentimentality settles for illusion.

And yet perhaps we should not be too critical of Emmeline and of sentimentality. Does sentimentality not offer an escape from the dreariness of the world? The sentimental person flees from such dreariness to an idealized picture of the world, reducing the persons and things of the world to mere occasions. Emmeline enjoys herself, enjoys what she takes to be her strong sentiments, based though they may in fact be on her illusions, enjoys even her anxieties and thus escapes from having to face the world, having to face the grey of reality. Does it matter that sentimentality is based on illusion? Is sentimentality not successful precisely because it lets us forget our self-deceit? Has despair not been silenced? Is bad faith not better than no faith?

Was this Nietzsche's meaning when he suggested that we are given illusion so that we would not perish over the truth?

---

247 The Danish cognate of the German "gleichgültig" ("ligeGYldigt") expresses the same semantic content: that which is "ligeGYldigt," "indifferent," is "lige-gYldigt," "equally valid" ("gleich-gYltig").

248 Oswald Spengler *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, II, 380–386.

## 5

I have entitled this session “Kitsch” and yet up to this point Kitsch has been mentioned only once. This is of course due to the fact that the word was unknown to Kierkegaard and therefore does not appear in “The First Love.”

The term would seem to have made its first appearance in the art-world of 19th century Munich.<sup>249</sup> The etymology is uncertain. It may derive from the English “sketch” – English tourists eager to take some artistic mementos home with them asked for sketches, quickly done paintings showing some icy peak or Alpine valley complete with morning sun, milkmaid, and handsome young forester.<sup>250</sup> Or perhaps some jolly monks brandishing beer steins and white radishes. It may also derive from the rather obscure German word *kitschen*, which suggests playing with mud, smoothing it out, a term that seems appropriate given both the color and the texture of such works. Someone familiar with academic painting of the nineteenth century will know how well the term fits much that was produced at the time. One of the first important painters to whom the term was applied was Arnold Böcklin.

Be this as it may, the word Kitsch was first applied to a certain kind of genre painting. Soon it carried the connotation of disapproval. Kitsch works seemed to show a lack of integrity on the part of the artist. The artist sold his soul to the sentimental bourgeois consumer to whom he gave what he wanted. Consider, e.g. this description of a painting by Bouguereau by the art critic John Canaday: “The wonder of a painting by Bouguereau is that it is so completely, so absolutely, all of a piece. Not a single element is out of harmony with the whole; there is not a flaw in the totality of the union between conception and execution.” What then is the problem? “The trouble with Bouguereau’s perfection is that the conception and the execution are perfectly false. Yet this is perfection of a kind, even if it is a perverse kind.”<sup>251</sup>

---

249 Cf. also Karsten Harries *The Meaning of Modern Art*, pp. 144–152.

250 In *Repetition*, Constantin Constantius makes reference to the related phenomenon of “Nürnberg print[s]” (*R*, 158 / *SKS* 4, 33), which he draws on for a discussion of the aesthetic qualities of farce that bears on the question of Kitsch treated here.

251 John Canaday *Mainstreams of Modern Art*, p. 154.

Within the category of Kitsch we can thus distinguish between more and less successful paintings. Kitsch, too, has its masterpieces. And these command increasingly high prices. Thirty years ago it would have been an excellent idea to invest in a painter like Bougue-reau.

But let me return to the term Kitsch. To call a work of art Kitsch is to condemn it for being bad art. But there is a great deal of bad art that we do not condemn as Kitsch. To condemn something as Kitsch is to condemn it on moral grounds. Modernists such as Adolf Loos and his contemporaries thus experienced much of the architecture of turn of the century Vienna as Kitsch, because like padded clothing, they felt it lied, even as it addressed all too human desires: "Whenever I stroll along the Ring, it always seems to me as if a modern Potemkin had wanted to carry out his orders here, as if he had wanted to persuade someone that in coming to Vienna he had been transported into a city of nothing but aristocrats."<sup>252</sup> Loos is quite aware of the widespread willingness to collude with such deception: "The simple man, who had rented only one room and a W.C. on the uppermost floor, was overcome with a blissful feeling of feudal splendor and lordly grandeur whenever he looked at the building he lived in from the outside. Does the owner of an imitation diamond not gaze fondly at the glittering glass? Oh, the tale of the deceiver deceived!"<sup>253</sup>

Adolf Hitler, newly arrived in the Austrian capital, was such a consumer of Kitsch: as we can read in *Mein Kampf*: "From morning to late at night I ran from one object of interest to another, but it was always the buildings that held my primary interest. For hours I could stand in front of the Opera, for hours I could gaze at the Parliament; the whole Ring Boulevard seemed to me like an enchantment out of *The Thousand-and-One Nights*."<sup>254</sup> The Kitsch consumer wants to be enchanted. The interest in architecture and enchantment remained with Hitler to the very end. Hitler offered the German people their golden calf.

And here we get a new insight into the essence of Kitsch. What defines Kitsch is, as Hermann Broch pointed out, precisely the reoccupation of the place once occupied by a transcendent reality that claimed

---

252 Adolf Loos "Die Potemkin'sche Stadt," p. 28; English translation Adolf Loos "Potemkin City," p. 95.

253 Adolf Loos "Die Potemkin'sche Stadt," p. 29; "Potemkin City," p. 25.

254 Adolf Hitler *Mein Kampf*, p. 19.

human beings, a place that for whatever reason has become empty, with an artificial and inevitably finite construction.<sup>255</sup>

To return to Emmeline: romantic Kitsch does not so much arouse love or desire, but their simulacrum – their simulacrum precisely because love or desire are no longer related to what would warrant it, because reality has been reduced to a mere occasion. A's sketch of Emmeline provides us with something like an anatomy of the Kitsch personality.

---

255 Hermann Broch "Hofmannsthal und seine Zeit"; and "Einige Bemerkungen zum Problem des Kitsches."

## 8. The Rotation of Crops

### 1

Today we turn to the second of the two essays that have for their common theme the category of the interesting, to “The Rotation of Crops.” Already last time I suggested that the interesting offers us something like a key to Kierkegaard’s understanding of the aesthetic life. Once you have understood the interesting the rest falls into place.

I also pointed out that the interesting is best understood as an answer to boredom. Accordingly A starts this essay, which is to give us his theory of the interesting, with a discussion of boredom: “People with experience maintain that proceeding from a basic principle is supposed to be very reasonable; I yield to them and proceed from the basic principle that all people are boring. Or is there anyone who would be boring enough to contradict me in this regard? This basic principle has to the highest degree the repelling force always required in the negative, which is actually the principle of all motion.”<sup>256</sup> The reference here is, as the endnote to the English translation points out, first of all to Hegel,<sup>257</sup> but equally well one could go to Plato. Put in its most basic form: the negative repels. What is experienced as lacking leads to a demand for satisfaction. Consider in this connection the Platonic understanding of *eros*. Originating in lack, *eros* seeks satisfaction, demands plenitude.<sup>258</sup>

The motion A here has in mind is the search for the interesting, where we should perhaps ask: how is the pursuit of the interesting related to *eros*? Is it the inverse? Or is there a kind of plenitude it, too, seeks to recover?

Boredom being repellent, we seek to escape from it. And what promises such an escape is the interesting. The polarity good and evil has here been replaced with that of the interesting and the boring. Thus A calls boredom the root of all evil: “If, then, my thesis is true, a person needs only to ponder how corrupting boredom is for people,

---

256 *EO1*, 285 / *SKS 2*, 275.

257 *EO1*, 641, n. 3.

258 *Symposium*, 199e-200e.

tempering his reflections more or less according to his desire to diminish or increase his *impetus*, and if he wants to press the speed of the motion to the highest point, almost with danger to the locomotive, he needs only to say to himself: Boredom is the root of all evil. It is very curious that boredom, which itself has such a calm and sedate nature, can have such a capacity to initiate motion. The effect that boredom brings about is absolutely magical, but this effect is one not of attraction but of repulsion."<sup>259</sup> The claim that boredom is the root of all evil deserves our serious attention. What is the root of boredom? What leaves us bored with our everyday existence?

Playfully A proceeds to sketch the history of the world not as a progress of reason and freedom, as Hegel did, but as the progress of boredom, where the two accounts are not unrelated. "Adam was bored because he was alone; therefore Eve was created. Since that moment, boredom entered the world and grew in quantity in exact proportion to the growth of population. Adam was bored alone; then Adam and Eve were bored together; then Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel were bored *en famille*. After that, the population of the world increased and the nations of the world were bored *en masse*. To amuse themselves, they hit upon the notion of building a tower so high that it would reach the sky. This notion is just as boring as the tower was high and is a terrible demonstration of how boredom has gained the upper hand. Then they were dispersed around the world, just as people now travel abroad, but they continue to be bored. And what consequences this boredom had: humankind stood tall and fell far, first through Eve, then from the Babylonian tower."<sup>260</sup> This leaves us with the question: just how are boredom and freedom related?

## 2

But what is boredom? A gives an interesting answer: boredom he claims is demonic pantheism.<sup>261</sup> Boredom would then appear to be something like a species of pantheism. How are we to understand this? A's first answer is suggested by an understanding of pantheism as holding that ev-

---

259 *EO1*, 285 / *SKS* 2, 275.

260 *EO1*, 286 / *SKS* 2, 276.

261 *EO1*, 290 / *SKS* 2, 279.

everything is full of God. This suggests that everything is equivalent, i. e. of equal value, i. e. *gleichgültig*, i. e. indifferent. But this slide suggests a need to distinguish between boredom and pantheism, and A does indeed draw such a distinction. “Pantheism ordinarily implies the qualification of fullness; with boredom it is the reverse: it is built upon emptiness, but for this very reason it is a pantheistic qualification. Boredom rests upon the nothing that interlaces existence; its dizziness is infinite, like that which comes from looking into a bottomless abyss.”<sup>262</sup> This invites the question: how is boredom related to Heideggerian anxiety?<sup>263</sup> Does anxiety not also “rest upon the nothing that interlaces existence”?

As already suggested, one thing shared by pantheism and boredom is that both the pantheist and the bored individual find everything equally valuable and thus find it difficult to act. Freedom lets the bored person understand everything as just happening to be what it is; he sees no good reason to do one thing rather than another. It seems all the same. While the pantheist senses the presence of God in everything, and thus finds everything infinitely significant, the bored person, because he senses the nothingness pervading everything, finds nothing worthwhile. But how is God to be understood? Is God not supposed to be infinite and as such transcend all finite determinations? As negative theology demonstrates, God and nothing are extremes that touch. And the same can be said of God and freedom, which, as Descartes points out, is what is most godlike in us.<sup>264</sup> And the same can also be said of pantheism and nihilism.

What is this nothingness A is here speaking of? A tells us that it causes a certain dizziness, a kind of vertigo. Consider once more: “Boredom rests upon the nothing that interlaces existence; its dizziness is infinite, like that which comes from looking into a bottomless abyss.”<sup>265</sup> Note the proximity to the rhetoric of the sublime. This passage invites comparison with one in Descartes’ Second Meditation: “...just as if I had all of a sudden fallen into very deep water, I am so disconcerted that I can neither make certain of setting my feet on the bottom, nor can I swim

---

262 EO1, 291 / SKS 2, 280.

263 Martin Heidegger *Sein und Zeit*, § 40, pp. 184–191 / *Being and Time*, pp. 228–235. The relationship between Kierkegaard and Heidegger’s conception of anxiety has been discussed by Dan Magurshak in his article “The Concept of Anxiety: The Keystone of the Kierkegaard-Heidegger Relationship.”

264 René Descartes *Meditations on First Philosophy, The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 1, p. 175.

265 EO1, 291 / SKS 2, 280.

and support myself on the surface.”<sup>266</sup> Descartes is here speaking of the result of his decision to doubt in order gain a firm foundation. In both cases the experience is characterized by a sense of having lost one’s place. There is no ground on which to stand, no sign telling us where to go.

As long as we accept our place in the world, such vertigo is ruled out. The world is experienced as having certain claims on us. Other people, society, our body make demands and we do not stop very often to ask whether these demands are indeed meaningful. But just such a stopping and stepping back would seem to be a presupposition of boredom. The bored individual detaches himself from his situation in the world. The cause of such detachment is reflection. Rather like Cartesian doubt, boredom and an awareness of the nothingness pervading reality have their foundation in a movement of reflection that opposes the individual to the world by questioning it, demanding that it reveal its meaning or reason. Increasingly the individual confronts the world as a totality of equivalent, *gleichgültige*, mute facts.<sup>267</sup> At the heart of boredom is thus something rather like what Sartre calls nausea. The everyday cares and concerns have somehow lost their hold on us and as a result things reveal themselves in their brute presence, in their pointless mute presence.<sup>268</sup> There is no good reason why things are as they are, why indeed they are at all. The world in which we find ourselves seems accidental through and through. As Sartre says in *Nausée*: “The essential thing is contingency. I mean that one cannot define existence as a necessity. To exist is simply to be there; those who exist let themselves be encountered, but you can never deduce anything from them. I believe that there are people who have understood this. Only they tried to overcome this contingency by inventing a necessary, causal being. But no necessary being can explain existence: contingency is not a delusion, a probability, which can be dissipated; it is the absolute, consequently, the perfect free gift.”<sup>269</sup>

This passage helps us to understand the relationship between pantheism and boredom a little better. Both the pantheist and the bored

---

266 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

267 Cf. the opening proposition of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*: “Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist.”

268 In this regard, cf. also Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s famous “Lord Chandos Letter.”

269 Jean-Paul Sartre *Nausea*, p. 176.

person have left the ordinary world and everyday attitudes to persons and things behind, but whereas one sees all things as revelatory of God, the other sees them as revelatory of nothing and just this depresses and repels him. This makes boredom something to be avoided. The place which God had occupied here has become empty. The foundation of boredom then is nihilism. We should however remember how difficult it can be to draw a sharp distinction between God and nothing.

The nihilist is essentially carefree, i. e. nothing is experienced as having a claim on him.<sup>270</sup> There is nothing for which he cares. A consequence of this is that the bored individual is essentially amoral, not immoral. To be moral or immoral we have to recognize certain claims. We have to have a sense that certain actions ought to, or ought not to be done. To the bored individual the world does not present such oughts. It is silent. That is why he is an amoralist. Everything is allowed and nothing is worth doing. This is the predicament of the bored individual from which he seeks to extricate himself: "Boredom is the demonic pantheism. It becomes evil itself if one continues in it as such; as soon as it is annulled, however, it is the true pantheism. But it is annulled only by amusing oneself – ergo, one ought to amuse oneself. To say that it is annulled by work betrays a lack of clarity, for idleness can certainly be canceled by work, since this is its opposite, but boredom cannot, as is seen in the fact that the busiest workers of all, those whirring insects with their bustling buzzing, are the most boring of all, and if they are not bored it is because they do not know what boredom is – but then the boredom is not annulled."<sup>271</sup> I suspect that many today are guilty of this confusion. Forty years ago or so work was thus said to hold the key to the solution of "the problem that has no name," i. e. the problem of the unfulfilled suburban housewife, left at home, bored, while her husband worked. And today we need to worry about how to keep busy the increasing percentage of the population which has too little to do. The assumption in both cases is that as long as one works one will not be bored. This was an important part of the argument advanced by Betty Friedan in the *Feminine Mystique*.<sup>272</sup> A no-nonsense nine to five job was what was needed, or better, not just a job, but a career.

---

270 For a related discussion of the problem of nihilism, cf. Karsten Harries *In a Strange Land*.

271 EO1, 290 / SKS 2, 279.

272 Betty Friedan *The Feminine Mystique*.

A to be sure would not accept this argument. He would be quick to point out that most work is terribly boring. Not to have to work could be looked at as an opportunity. Should we not welcome every opportunity that allows us to be dilettantes, i. e. people who do what they do, not in order to make money, but because they love it? And does this not characterize the true philosopher, that he is a dilettante? As Socrates knew, there is a sense in which the professionalization of philosophy threatens the very soul of philosophy.

I could imagine A writing rather acidly about the professionalization of philosophy and of women as processes that have made both narrower and more boring. Today, he might point out, many women have begun to match the boringness of their husbands or male colleagues – an important chapter no doubt in that history written as the progress of boredom that A has sketched for us. Perhaps we should ask whether the work mystique is not in the end more sinister than what Friedan called the feminine mystique.

The word “mystique” suggests that something is endowed with a false, quasi-religious significance. Traditionally such an aura has indeed surrounded work. And this glorification of work is likely to increase as boredom increases.

### 3

A suggests another answer to boredom: we should cultivate the interesting. This is the point of the rotation method he advocates. A distinguishes between an extensive and an intensive variant. An example of the former is the farmer who has exhausted the land in a certain area and now moves on to another plot of land. Similarly the bored individual moves from one scene to another. “One is weary of living in the country and moves to the city; one is weary of one’s native land and goes abroad; one is *europamiüde* [weary of Europe] and goes to America, etc.; one indulges in the fanatical hope of an endless journey from star to star. Or there is another direction, but still extensive. One is weary of eating on porcelain and eats on silver; wearying of that, one eats on gold; one burns down half of Rome to visualize the Trojan conflagration.”<sup>273</sup> The interesting depends here on the contrast between the antecedent and the subsequent states. Someone could write a paper on

---

273 EO1, 291–292 / SKS 2, 281.

travel advertisements from this point of view. They would seem to address themselves to those who have embraced the extensive rotation method: if you have seen Greece, try something new, try India. The key word here is “new.” The interesting is what is fresh, new, experienced for the first time.

Friedrich Schlegel, in a brilliant essay written in 1795, made an attempt to interpret the literary developments of his time in terms of the category of the interesting.<sup>274</sup> The category of the interesting then is another thing Kierkegaard had borrowed from the romantics.<sup>275</sup> The law that governs the development of modern literature, Schlegel had argued, is novelty. Critics now come to be interested not so much in whether a work is good or bad, but rather they wonder whether something of the sort has already been done. The result is a rapidity and discontinuity in the development of literature that up to then had been unknown. The artist wants to be original, even if such striving for originality easily leads to nonsense. The whole topic of originality and why it should have drawn so much attention at the time invites further discussion. Do the celebration of the original genius and the interesting stand in a relationship analogous to that of *via affirmativa* and *via negativa*? But let us return to Schlegel’s understanding of modernity. Increasingly the public wants the artist to be nothing more than an interesting entertainer. To the expected the artist thus opposes the unexpected, and as the once unexpected in turn comes to be expected, he has to find more intense forms of expression. The interesting becomes the shocking, the obscene, until a point is reached where what Schlegel calls the “disgusting crudities” cannot be raised to a higher power and the attempt to do so ends up in mere babbling. In the end the interesting thus has to return to the boring.

It is instructive to look at the development of modern literature and art from this perspective.<sup>276</sup> I would suggest, e.g. that Lyotard’s post-modern sublime, on closer analysis, turns out to be but a version of the old interesting.<sup>277</sup>

---

274 Cf. Friedrich Schlegel *Über das Studium der Griechischen Poesie*, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, vol. 1, pp. 217–276.

275 On the relation of Kierkegaard’s category of the interesting to the German romantics, cf. Walter Rehm *Kierkegaard und der Verführer*, Chapter 4.

276 In this connection, cf. also Karsten Harries *The Meaning of Modern Art*, pp. 54–60; as well as Hans Sedlmayr “Kierkegaard über Picasso.”

277 In this respect, cf. also Karsten Harries “Modernity’s Bad Conscience.”

## 4

The author of “The Rotation of Crops,” to be sure, knows that the extensive employment of the rotation method must lead to an ever accelerating and in the end self-defeating race for novelty. We have to learn to move more slowly, more deliberately. “The method I propose does not consist in changing the soil but, like proper crop rotation, consists in changing the method of cultivation and the kinds of crops. Here at once is the principle of limitation, the sole saving principle in the world. The more a person limits himself, the more resourceful he becomes. A solitary prisoner for life is extremely resourceful; to him a spider can be a source of great amusement. Think of our school days; we were at an age where there was no aesthetic consideration in the choosing of our teachers, and therefore they were often very boring – how resourceful we were then!”<sup>278</sup> Think of the games children play: not stepping on lines; tapping a ball against some wall without allowing it to touch the ground – this will tell you how old you are going to get.

The intensive rotation method requires invention. Something quite ordinary provides the point of departure, which then is endowed by the individual with an extraordinary significance. The possibilities here are endless. Think once more of a boring concert or lecture and of the many occasions it provides for a cultivation of the interesting. The problem with the person who adopts the intensive rotation method is that he thinks the situation is lacking in interest. He forgets that interest is something with which the individual endows the situation. The situation furnishes only the occasion.

The interesting is thus a meaning discovered in what is in itself meaningless. It thus promises an answer to the problem of nihilism. If we take the world too seriously we shall never discover how interesting it can be. A’s first demand of this aestheticism – quite in line with what Kant demands of the experience of the beautiful – is that the claims of the everyday world be bracketed. For the truly bored person there is no problem here: he is already carefree. With the bracketing of care everything is transformed into an occasion and made available for the games of the aesthetic individual. “Arbitrariness is the whole secret. It is popularly believed that there is no great art to being arbitrary, and yet it takes a profound study to be arbitrary in such a way that a person does not himself run wild in it but himself has pleasure from it. One

---

278 *EO1*, 292 / *SKS 2*, 281.

does not enjoy the immediate object but something else that one arbitrarily introduces. One sees the middle of a play; one reads the third section of a book. One thereby has enjoyment quite different from that the author so kindly intended."<sup>279</sup> Implicit in the search for the interesting is thus a rejection of the place we have been assigned by the situation in which we find ourselves. The search for the interesting is essentially a flight from reality. Reality furnishes only the point of departure, only the occasion. "It is very advantageous to let the realities of life be undifferentiated in an arbitrary interest like that. Something accidental is made into the absolute and as such into an object of absolute admiration."<sup>280</sup>

It is then not the immediate that is enjoyed, but something that the aesthete himself brings to the situation. It is thus clear that A, when he makes enjoyment the answer to boredom, has in mind something quite specific, namely reflective enjoyment. The interesting depends on a movement of reflection that enables the individual to detach himself from his engaged being in the world in order to enjoy it: imagine yourself at a football game cheering with the rest. The aesthete would use this as an occasion to enjoy himself in a quite literal sense, and the expression "enjoy oneself" invites reflection. Gently he might poke fun at himself for enjoying something as plebeian as football. This does not mean that he would therefore stop watching the game. He might even cheer more enthusiastically than the rest, divorcing himself at the same time from that cheering individual, becoming his own spectator, enjoying his superiority over the watching crowd, thus doubling his enjoyment by not only enjoying the game, but himself as well.

The aesthete avoids true passion, he wants to remain free and he does not want this freedom to be threatened by getting involved. Thus he wants no real friends and is horrified by the thought of marriage. Yet he plays at being passionate. He is passionate as long as passion suits him, but he knows that it is within his power to shift into another mood, should he so desire. Consider this description by Johannes, the Seducer of his state of mind: "I scarcely know myself. My mind roars like a turbulent sea in the storms of passion. If someone else could see my soul in this state, it would seem to him that it, like a skiff, plunged prow-first into the ocean, as if in its dreadful momentum it would have to steer down into the depths of the abyss. He does not see that high on

---

279 *EO1*, 299 / *SKS 2*, 288.

280 *EO1*, 299–300 / *SKS 2*, 288.

the mast a sailor is on the lookout. Roar away, you wild forces, roar away, you powers of passion, even if your waves hurl foam towards the clouds, you still are not able to pile yourselves up over my head – I am sitting as calmly as the king of the mountain.”<sup>281</sup> The aesthete remains the ruler of his moods. Engaged in a love affair or watching a ball game, he remains disengaged, careful to watch himself and his own reactions. Like a diarist who enjoys not so much life itself as the entries in his diary, he puts life at a distance, filters it through the medium of his reflections. And it is precisely this distance that safeguards his freedom and enables him to pick out some things and leave out others, transforming life into something more interesting: “How beautiful it is to be in love; how interesting it is to know that one is in love. This, you see, is the difference.”<sup>282</sup> Someone really in love will be made unhappy by the absence of the beloved. The aesthetic individual will enjoy this stage, too, may indeed enjoy it more. For the absence of the beloved make it easier for the lover to treat the beloved only as an occasion around which to construct his reveries.

And is unhappiness not itself interesting? What is more interesting and in a reflective sense more enjoyable than profound melancholy caused by the death of the beloved. Edgar Allan Poe was quite aware of this. When he calls this the most poetic theme he classifies himself as an artist of the interesting.<sup>283</sup>

In the beginning I pointed out that the polarity of the interesting and the boring replaces the traditional polarity of good and evil; similarly it replaces the traditional polarity of beauty and ugliness. Good and evil, happiness and unhappiness, beauty and ugliness are now used as stimuli, as occasions to titillate. And just because good, happiness, and beauty have traditionally been favored, it is interesting to reverse such emphasis and to celebrate evil, unhappiness, and ugliness. Evil is much more interesting than goodness.

I conclude with a sentence from the “Diapsalmata” we have already considered: “And now the innocent pleasures of life. It must be granted to them that they have only one flaw – that they are so innocent.”<sup>284</sup>

---

281 *EO1*, 324–325 / *SKS 2*, 314.

282 *EO1*, 334 / *SKS 2*, 323.

283 “...the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world – and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover” (Edgar Allan Poe “The Philosophy of Composition,” p. 165).

284 *EO1*, 25 / *SKS 2*, 34.

## 9. The Diary of the Seducer

### 1

“The Seducer’s Diary” concludes the first volume of *Either/Or*. First a brief look at the “Diary”: it begins with a short introduction, supposedly by A, in which A describes how he came in possession of the “Diary.” That introduction concludes with three letters Cordelia is said to have written to Johannes and which he is said to have returned unopened.

The diary itself is made up of entries relating to the seduction, of letters to Cordelia, and of some interspersed little scenes not directly related to the seduction. But just these scenes cast an interesting light on the seduction, as I shall try to show.

### 2

But first let me return to the introduction. Recall that Victor Eremita in his preface had expressed doubt as to whether A’s claims not to be the author of the diary were to be accepted. “The last of A’s papers is a narrative titled ‘The Seducer’s Diary.’ Here we meet with new difficulties, inasmuch as A does not declare himself the author but only the editor. This is an old literary device to which I would not have much to object if it did not further complicate my own position, since one author becomes enclosed within the other like the boxes in a Chinese puzzle. This is not the place to explain in greater detail what confirms me in my view; I shall only point out that the prevailing mood in A’s preface somehow manifests the poet.”<sup>285</sup> He also points out that the diary fits only too well in with the preceding: “The idea of the seducer is suggested in the piece on the immediate erotic as well as in ‘Silhouettes’ – namely, that the counterpart to Don Giovanni must be a reflective seducer in the category of the interesting, where the issue therefore is not how many he seduces but how. I find no trace of such joy in the preface but indeed, as noted previously, a trepidation, a certain horror, that pre-

---

285 *EO1*, 8–9 / *SKS* 2, 16.

sumably has its basis in his poetic relation to this idea.”<sup>286</sup> I have already called your attention to the title sheet on which the Seducer is said to have written “*Commentarius perpetuus* [Running commentary], no. 4.”<sup>287</sup> Is it the fourth such commentary? But this, too, can be understood in different ways. Is it the fourth of many such commentaries on different affairs – something of the sort is later suggested by A – or is it the fourth such commentary on the same affair? The question refers us to the difference between the intensive and the extensive rotation method. Consider also the already mentioned fact that on the facing page you have a reference to aria no. 4 from *Don Giovanni*. “On the basis of my former acquaintance with him I did not consider that his life was in great need of a commentary, but according to the insight I now had, I do not deny that the title was chosen with great discernment and much understanding, with truly aesthetic, objective mastery of himself and of the situation. His life has been an attempt to live poetically. With a sharply developed organ for discovering the interesting in life, he has known how to find it and after having found it has continually reproduced his experiences half poetically. Therefore his diary is not historically accurate or strictly narrative; it is not indicative, but subjunctive.”<sup>288</sup> The diary is written in the subjunctive. And there is a sense in which every aesthete lives his life in the subjunctive. The subjunctive is inseparable from the diary’s poetic character: “How then can it be explained that the diary nevertheless has taken on such a poetic tinge? The answer is not difficult; it is easily explained by his poetic nature, which is not abundant enough or, if you please not deficient enough to separate poetry and actuality from each other. The poetic was the plus he himself brought along. This plus was the poetic he enjoyed in the poetic situation of actuality; this he recaptured in the form of poetic reflection. This was the second enjoyment, and his whole life was intended for enjoyment. In the first case he personally enjoyed the esthetic; in the second case, he esthetically enjoyed his personality. The point in the first case was that he egotistically enjoyed personally that which in part actuality had given to him and which in part he himself had used to fertilize actuality; in the second case, his personality was volatilized, and he then enjoyed the situation and himself in the situa-

---

286 *EO1*, 9 / *SKS 2*, 16–17.

287 *EO1*, 303 / *SKS 2*, 293.

288 *EO1*, 304 / *SKS 2*, 294. In this connection, cf. also Karsten Harries “Transformations of the Subjunctive.”

tion. In the first case he continually needed actuality as the occasion, as an element; in the second case, actuality was drowned in the poetic.”<sup>289</sup> Of the three letters by Cordelia he is said to have returned unopened, the first, I suggest, reminds us of Elvira, the second of Gretchen, the third of Marie Beaumarchais.

## 3

In approaching the “Diary” itself, let me focus first on what the Seducer himself calls *actiones in distans*. “In addition to the complete information about his relation to Cordelia, the diary has several little pictures interwoven here and there. Wherever such a piece is found, there is a ‘NB’ in the margin. These word pictures have nothing at all to do with Cordelia’s story but have given me a vivid idea of an expression he often used, even though I formerly understood it in another way: One should always have a little line out on the side. If an earlier volume of this diary had fallen into my hands, I probably would have encountered several of these, which in the margin he himself calls: *actiones in distans* [actions at a distance], for he himself declares that Cordelia occupied him too much for him really to have time to look around.”<sup>290</sup> These scenes tell us something about the Seducer we learn in no other way: they provide a kind of context for the seduction. Of special interest are these remarks Kierkegaard later deleted: “N. B. It probably would be best to have the so-called *actiones in distans* keep pace in between; that will provide the correct elucidation and show the nature of his passion.”<sup>291</sup> “N. B. The diary must not begin with Cordelia’s story but with the first *actio in distans*, which is in the blue book.”<sup>292</sup>

3.1: The diary does indeed begin with one such scene.<sup>293</sup> The Seducer watches a young girl; getting out of a carriage, going into a store to buy some things. I single out just these lines: “She takes off her glove to show to the mirror and me a right hand as white and shapely as that of an ancient statue, without any ornaments, not even a flat gold ring on the fourth finger – bravo!”<sup>294</sup> To what extent is the poet

---

289 *EO1*, 305 / *SKS 2*, 295.

290 *EO1*, 311 / *SKS 2*, 300–301.

291 *EO1*, 557–558.

292 *EO1*, 558.

293 *EO1*, 313–317 / *SKS 2*, 304–307.

294 *EO1*, 316 / *SKS 2*, 306.

like the mirror? Sooner or later, he will catch up with her. “She will be overtaken” are the concluding words of this *actio in distans*.<sup>295</sup> Life has provided him with an occasion that for the time being is left undeveloped.

3.2: What immediately follows is another such episode, involving a 16 year old girl, on the way home, whose servant falls into the mud and whom he walks home.<sup>296</sup>

3.3: The once again immediately following third episode involves a girl who has made a date with her lover at some exhibition who turns out to be late.<sup>297</sup> The ending is once again described as a beginning: “A thousand thanks my child; that smile is worth more than to me than you think; it is a beginning, and the beginning is always the hardest. Now we are acquaintances; our acquaintance is established in a piquant situation – for the time being it is enough for me. You no doubt will stay here scarcely more than an hour; in two hours I will know who you are – why else do you think the police keep census records?”<sup>298</sup>

3.4: Cordelia makes her appearance in the *fourth* such episode, where the number 4 no doubt holds a special significance.<sup>299</sup> In a way the meeting seems just as accidental as the others were: a girl in a green cloak, that is all – another variation on the same theme. He does, however, seem a bit more impressed by her: “Have I become blind? Has the inner eye of the soul lost its power? I have seen her, but it is as if I had seen a heavenly revelation – so completely has her image vanished again for me.”<sup>300</sup> Note the shift from entries that up to now have given you the month, i. e. “April 7,” to simply “The ninth.”

3.5: The next such *actio in distans* comes a bit later, as the narrative of the seduction itself is beginning to unfold.<sup>301</sup> A girl is standing in a doorway not to get wet from the rain. He considers offering her his umbrella. This time the Seducer explicitly rejects the occasion offered, as his own work of art demands a single focus: “the green cloak requires self-denial” are the closing words.<sup>302</sup>

295 *EO1*, 317 / *SKS 2*, 307.

296 *EO1*, 317–319 / *SKS 2*, 307–309.

297 *EO1*, 319–323 / *SKS 2*, 310–313.

298 *EO1*, 323 / *SKS 2*, 313.

299 *EO1*, 323–324 / *SKS 2*, 313.

300 *EO1*, 323 / *SKS 2*, 313.

301 *EO1*, 328–330 / *SKS 2*, 318–319.

302 *EO1*, 330 / *SKS 2*, 319.

3.6: The next and rather long such episode comes only quite a few pages later, suggesting how much Cordelia is now occupying him: this time he describes a windy and sunny June afternoon.<sup>303</sup> He watches girls and couples struggle with the wind. This lyrical scene closes on a somewhat disturbing note: “There go two who are destined for each other. What rhythm in their step, what assurance, built on mutual trust, in their whole bearing: what *harmonia praestabilita* in all heir movements, what self-sufficient solidity. They are not light and graceful in posture, they are not dancing with each other. No, there is durability about them, a boldness that awakens an infallible hope, that inspires mutual respect. I wager that their view of life is this: life is a road. And they do seem determined to walk arm in arm with each other through life’s joys and sorrows. They are so harmonious that the lady has even surrendered her right to walk on the flagstones. – But, you dear zephyrs, why are you so busy with that couple? They do not seem worth the attention. Is there anything in particular to look at? But it is half past one – off to Hoibroplads.”<sup>304</sup> Does the love of this couple point to something the Seducer is missing?

3.7: The next thirty pages or so are once again uninterrupted. Only on page *EO1*, 382 / *SKS 2*, 370 is there another such episode: He observes the meeting of two lovers, one of whom is his friend.<sup>305</sup> Again one senses a lack in him as he is watching lovers. Note once more the ending: “But now to Cordelia. I can always make use of a mood, and the girl’s beautiful longing has certainly stirred me.”<sup>306</sup> There is something disturbing about this remark. Does Cordelia not arouse the proper mood in him? Does he not desire her? In this connection you should perhaps remember that when the time comes where he does want to present himself to Cordelia as incarnated desire, as Don Juan, what does he do? He reads? And what does he read? Plato’s *Phaedrus*.<sup>307</sup> Johannes uses Plato as an aphrodisiac. But we demand aphrodisiacs when we no longer desire. He who no longer desires, desires desire. We are back with Emmeline and her sentimentality.

---

303 *EO1*, 354–359 / *SKS 2*, 343–348.

304 *EO1*, 359 / *SKS 2*, 348.

305 *EO1*, 382–384 / *SKS 2*, 370–372.

306 *EO1*, 384 / *SKS 2*, 372.

307 *EO1*, 418 / *SKS 2*, 405.

3.8: The next such episode follows rather quickly.<sup>308</sup> He is in church, but instead of looking at the preacher he looks at a handkerchief on which the name of the beautiful holder is embroidered, Charlotte Hahn. This is the only such episode that will have a sequel. A small sub-plot is just beginning to develop.

3.9: In a sequel we learn that the Seducer and his servant have waited a total of eight hours for this same girl: “When I look at her, my mind simultaneously becomes solemn and yet desiring. Otherwise, the girl means nothing to me; all I ask is this greeting, nothing more, even if she were willing to give it. Her greeting puts me in a mood, and in turn I squander this mood on Cordelia.”<sup>309</sup> This passage once again suggests a certain inadequacy about the affair with Cordelia.

3.10: Just a few pages before we had another such episode: This time the Seducer is watching a lieutenant meet his girlfriend.<sup>310</sup> One has the feeling that the Seducer is either engaged in a monologue or watching others, often couples. This is the time when Cordelia is just about to break the engagement, also the time when his love letters to Cordelia begin.

3.11: In the next such episode we find him watching a fisherman’s daughter.<sup>311</sup>

3.12: The following episode is similar to the one with which the Diary opened.<sup>312</sup> A girl, as it turns out one he already knows, has walked out into the country, accepts a ride back with a peatcutter, whom the Seducer manages to get drunk so that she finally has to accept his offer of his own carriage. This *actio in distans* concludes with the words: “You can be amused by the whole affair, laugh a little, and think about me a little. I ask no more. It might seem to be very little, but for me that is enough. It is a beginning, and I am especially good at the principles of beginnings.”<sup>313</sup> The Seducer is strong on beginnings, not so good on development, and not good at all at endings.

3.13: The last such episode comes on pages *EO1*, 412–415 / *SKS* 2, 400–402. This time the Seducer meets a servant girl in the Deer Park. By promising to marry her, he arranges for a rendezvous in her

---

308 *EO1*, 385–386 / *SKS* 2, 373–374.

309 *EO1*, 396 / *SKS* 2, 384.

310 *EO1*, 393–394 / *SKS* 2, 381–382.

311 *EO1*, 402–403 / *SKS* 2, 390–391.

312 *EO1*, 408–410 / *SKS* 2, 396–398.

313 *EO1*, 410 / *SKS* 2, 398.

bed-room the next night. Once again the conclusion is significant: "Once I get a foothold in her room, I can read the banns from the pulpit myself. I have always tried to develop the beautiful Greek *αὐτάρκεια* [self-sufficiency] and in particular to make a pastor superfluous."<sup>314</sup> There is no suggestion here of honoring what he has claimed before: that he desires only what is given freely and that he will not rely on deception. And once again there is the suggestion that the affair with Cordelia is not as fulfilling as it should be, that it leaves him dissatisfied. Is it carried on too spiritual a plane?

Taken together these episodes suggest that something is lacking, that the Seducer himself senses that something is lacking in his affair with Cordelia. And that lack would seem to be twofold: one thing that is lacking is the ethical: continuity; the other thing that is lacking is sensuousness, sex, reality.

#### 4

In the Diary itself that sense of lack is underscored by the way we learn hardly anything about the everyday life of the Seducer. His imaginary life, made up of his monologues about Cordelia, seems only very loosely tied to such a life. One gets a sense that the everyday life might be quite ordinary and uninteresting. The aesthetic life thus seems incapable of giving a meaning to life in its entirety: it lacks the whole. But is such wholeness not a mark of aesthetic success according to traditional aesthetics? Is the Seducer's aesthetic existence finally unaesthetic?

The impression that the Seducer is losing touch with reality is heightened by the increasing lack of reference to particular dates as the diary progresses. In the introduction to the diary A remarks on this: "From Cordelia I received a collection of letters. Whether it is all of them, I do not know, although it seemed to me that she once gave me to understand that she herself had confiscated some. I have copied them and shall interleave them in my fair copy. Admittedly, they are not dated, but even if they were it would not help much, since the diary becomes more and more sparse as it proceeds."<sup>315</sup> The aesthetic individual loses touch with time. Indeed, as we have seen, it

---

314 *EO1*, 415 / *SKS 2*, 402.

315 *EO1*, 310 / *SKS 2*, 300.

is his project to conquer time, as for him time is the root of boredom.<sup>316</sup> But the price of this conquest of time is a flight into the imaginary.

That the loss of time goes together with a loss of reality is suggested by the already cited passage on page *EO1*, 304 / *SKS 2*, 294. The diary is in the subjunctive. It is written in the mode of the “as if.”<sup>317</sup>

## 5

But let us turn to the seduction itself. A first question to be raised is: why does the aesthetic life take the form of a seduction? Would it not be easier to become a poet? The aesthetic project, we said, is the project of transforming life into a work of art, into something to which the artist gives significance. But isn't this project made more difficult by struggling with another human being, by struggling to possess another person? Could he not choose some material that offers less resistance to the poetic imagination?

That the aesthetic program takes the form of a seduction suggests that the Seducer, too, is in need of the other, wants communication, even as he sees it as a threat to the autarchy he so prizes. His aim is to bring Cordelia to a point where of her own free will she will surrender to him. And yet there is something paradoxical about this project. He wants her to give herself to him of her own free will, and yet the point of the seduction is to make this surrender necessary. But if it is indeed necessary, how can it be free? And if Cordelia is indeed the author of her action, he must fail, for even as she gives herself to him, she asserts her freedom from him. We cannot possess the freedom of the other. The Seducer's project cannot possibly succeed as long as he faces her as a real individual. That individual he can never possess. All he can possess is a figment of his imagination. The Seducer comes quite close to admitting this when he points out that woman is the dream of man.

Human relationships can never be secure. We can never possess the other. The possibility that the other will turn away from us is always present and has its foundation in the other's freedom. That free-

---

316 That the project of “The Rotation of Crops” consists in conquering an alien temporality has recently also been argued by David J. Kangas *Kierkegaard's Instance*, pp. 56–64.

317 Cf. also the passage on *EO1*, 305 / *SKS 2*, 295 discussed earlier.

dom is a presupposition of a meaningful relationship. Without the other's freedom we remain alone. The desire to make sure of the other rests on a misunderstanding.

The Seducer, however, believes in the possibility of total surrender, but only because he is dreaming. This same belief, by the way, leads him to think that once the seduction has been accomplished, the girl ceases to be interesting. Had he confronted a real individual he would have realized that this goal is never achieved. A seduction may give us the illusion of possession. It cannot give more. And the longer one knows someone, the better one knows this.

Given his project, the Seducer would seem to find a suitable subject. Cordelia has lost her parents. She is an isolated figure, has relatively few friends, and luckily has not been corrupted by constantly having been surrounded by girls of her own age, which Kierkegaard seems to think the worst possible thing that can happen to a young girl. In addition she is somewhat puzzled at what it means to be a woman.

The Seducer, remembering the essay on the "Immediate Stages of the Erotic," tries to develop her femininity by at first pretending to be completely disinterested in Cordelia as a woman. First he talks to her aunt about agriculture and proceeds as if there were nothing more important; when he begins to talk to Cordelia more frequently he does not flirt, but talks to her as a person, i. e. on a level where sex is annulled, where disembodied spirit speaks to disembodied spirit. But just this offends her and makes her uneasily aware of her own femininity. He increases this uneasiness by using his eyes, the male gaze, as a weapon (cf. Sartre on the look).<sup>318</sup> By looking at her, he forces her to acknowledge her body. Excluding it in a sense, he also posits it.

It should be noted that the Seducer, although he recognizes that to treat Cordelia as essentially spirit fails to do justice to her, in the end does not get very much beyond this himself. For him the body is only an instrument, to be used to get possession of the other. He wants the other to identify with her body, so that in taking possession of that body, he is taking possession of her. Once again A's view here would seem to be very much like that of Sartre.

But let me return to the question I asked before: why does the aesthete insist on struggling with another individual? (Why does Picasso keep returning to painting women?) Isn't this a struggle he must inevi-

---

318 Jean-Paul Sartre *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 379–412.

tably lose, as the other in her freedom will always refuse integration into a work of art? Why then not turn away from other human beings and dream?

Because, it would seem, although the Seducer does not want permanent relationships with other human beings, he yet needs other human beings. Thus we learn that what fascinates him about Cordelia is her proud independence, which he himself cultivates by destroying the bonds which tie her to the bourgeois environment in which she was raised, by subjecting it to ridicule. The Seducer does not want to be alone, he wants communication, but communication on his own terms. And thus his dialogue inevitably degenerates into a monologue as he is once more alone. "My Cordelia, You know that I very much like to talk with myself. I have found in myself the most interesting person among my acquaintances. At times, I have feared that I would come to lack material for these conversations; now I have no fear, for now I have you. I shall talk with myself about you now and for all eternity, about the most interesting subject with the most interesting person – ah, I am only the most interesting person, you the most interesting subject."<sup>319</sup> Cordelia is only the occasion for a monologue. Precisely because of this the seduction lacks a sense of reality. And in the end it is this which makes the seduction less interesting than it should be. The Seducer is not confronting, is not struggling with another person. Such a struggle would be inexhaustible. But what he confronts is a figment of his own poetic imagination.

With "The Seducer's Diary" Kierkegaard wanted to show from within that the aesthetic project had to be a failure. That project is, as we have said, essentially a project to live life as a work of art. The work of art is understood here as what has its teleology within itself,<sup>320</sup> a conception Kierkegaard had inherited from Kant. To live aesthetically is to make the individual the sole author of his life. In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant calls aesthetic pleasure disinterested.<sup>321</sup> By that determination Kant places aesthetic experience in opposition both to moral interest and to the interest in sensuous satisfaction that is part of our being as embodied selves. Interest, as Kant understands it, is always interest in the reality of something. In this sense sexual desire is interest-

---

319 *EO1*, 401 / *SKS* 2, 389.

320 Cf. *EO2*, 272 / *SKS* 3, 259.

321 Cf. the "First Moment" in the *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, *Werke*, vol. 5, pp. 203–211.

ed. So is moral interest. Both presuppose the reality of the world. But this sense of reality is denied by the aesthetic project.

And here we have the root of the inadequacy of the aesthetic life: it is inadequate precisely because it fails to do justice to the sensuous on the one hand, to the moral on the other. To be aesthetic in Kierkegaard's sense, the human being must negate or, shall we say, teleologically suspend, the sensuous and the moral within himself. Both threaten the kind of freedom on which the aesthete insists. What remains as *telos* here is a rather spectral notion of the self. The premise of the aesthetic project is that the individual can endow his existence with meaning. By showing how unsatisfactory a life based on this premise has to be, Kierkegaard casts doubt on the project itself.

The failure of the aesthetic project is suggested right at the beginning of the "Diary" itself: "I can think of nothing more tormenting than a scheming mind that loses the thread and then directs all its keenness against itself as the conscience awakens and it becomes a matter of rescuing himself from this perplexity. The many exits from his foxhole are futile; the instant his troubled soul already thinks it sees daylight filtering in, it turns out to be a new entrance, and thus, like panic-stricken wild game, pursued by despair, he is continually seeking an exit, and continually finding an entrance through which he goes back into himself."<sup>322</sup> The aesthete remains buried within himself. He finds no outside. There is indeed something claustrophobic about the "Diary," too. We get no sense of a real outside.

The Seducer is the highly reflective individual who wants to become self-sufficient. This project must lead to self-alienation and thus to despair. Yet something positive must be said about this aesthetic project, too. Inwardness is necessary if we are to become full human beings. Before we can really give ourselves, we must gain possession of ourselves. To this extent the education of Cordelia is justified. Her aesthetic education gives her a freedom that she lacked before. The Seducer liberates her and to this extent his destruction of her familiar world is something positive. But where there is freedom there is uncertainty. We cannot make sure of the other. To declare one's love is always a venture, and the more spiritually developed the other, the more of a venture it is and remains. It is always possible that the other will refuse the hand extended. What the Seducer forgets is that this venture is part of what gives it its significance. The Seducer

---

322 *EO1*, 308 / *SKS 2*, 298.

lacks the openness necessary to make love dialectic. Love, too, for him has to degenerate into a monologue. But this is not his fate, but his choice: his pride bids him despair. His despair is his castle.

I conclude with one of the “Diapsalmata”: “I say of my sorrow what the Englishman says of his house: My sorrow is my castle. Many people look upon sorrow as one of life’s conveniences.”<sup>323</sup>

---

323 *EO1*, 21 / *SKS 2*, 30.

## 10. In Defense of Marriage

### 1

The second volume of *Either/Or* is a bit duller than the first and this is perhaps as it should be: Judge William is less interesting than A, let alone Johannes the Seducer. But then is a court official not supposed to be duller than a seducer? Not only is he duller; he does not quite seem to fit into the modern world: how can an enlightened modernist today not be provoked by his old-fashioned uncompromising defense of a marriage ideal that must strike some of you as utterly passé, as being just about as relevant as the pronouncements of the present pope? Consider for example the stress that the Judge places on having children?

Certainly, if A is right, the ethical is more boring than the aesthetic. And yet, it is just this that the Judge wants to deny in his first long letter to A: he tries to defend the aesthetic validity of marriage and on its behalf he presents a case that cannot just be dismissed. The Judge claims that, even given A's concern for the aesthetic, one can defend the validity of marriage, and this he sets out to do so. "There are two things that I must regard as my particular task: to show the aesthetic meaning of marriage and to show how the aesthetic in it may be retained despite life's numerous hindrances."<sup>324</sup>

### 2

The Judge's letter begins with a critical sketch of the aesthetic life, as exemplified by A's mode of existence. The charges made by the Judge are by now familiar: there is first of all the charge that the aesthetic life loses reality: "What you prefer is the first infatuation. You know how to sink down and hide in a dreaming, love-drunk *clairvoyance*. You completely envelop yourself, as it were, in the sheerest cobweb and then sit in wait. But you are not a child, not an awakening consciousness, and therefore your look has another meaning; but you are satisfied with it.

---

324 EO2, 8 / SKS 3, 18.

You love the accidental. A smile from a pretty girl is an interesting situation, a stolen glance, that is what you are hunting for, that is a motif for your aimless fantasy.<sup>325</sup>

The Judge remarks on A's reluctance to get involved: he is a psychologist, a peeping Tom, but his psychological interest lacks seriousness. In this connection the Judge refers to Chamisso's Peter Schlemihl, one of the most famous of romantic stories:<sup>326</sup> "You, however, actually live by plundering; unnoticed you creep up on people, steal from them their happy moment, their most beautiful moment, stick this shadow picture in your pocket as the tall man did in Schlemihl and take it out whenever you wish. You no doubt say that those involved lose nothing by this, that often they themselves do not know which is their most beautiful moment. You believe that they should rather be indebted to you, because with your study of the lighting, with magic formulas, you permitted them to stand forth transfigured in the supernatural amplitude of the rare moments. Perhaps they lose nothing thereby. And yet there is the question whether it is not conceivable that they retain a recollection of them that is always painful to them. But you do lose; you lose your time, your serenity, your patience for living, because you yourself know very well how impatient you are, you who once wrote to me that patience to bear life's burden must indeed be an extraordinary virtue, that you do not even have the patience to want to live."<sup>327</sup>

Peter Schlemihl is the story of a man who sold his shadow to the devil for money. A is thus likened by the Judge to the devil. Why does the devil want the shadows of us humans? Because he lacks such a shadow? Because he is jealous?

What is a shadow? The shadow signifies what makes the human being substantial and ties him to the earth. Spirits are traditionally said to cast no shadows. The man without a shadow is then one in whom the spiritual element predominates. The devil would seem to be the incarnation of spirit that cannot bind itself. So understood the devil is the incarnation of what Kant called radical evil and understood as the natural tendency of human beings to refuse to be bound by the moral

---

325 EO2, 7 / SKS 3, 17.

326 Albert von Chamisso *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte*; English edition *Peter Schlemiel: the Man Who Sold His Shadow*.

327 EO2, 10–11 / SKS 3, 20.

law.<sup>328</sup> To accept this bond is to be religious. And, although the etymology that ties the word “religion” to the Latin “religare,” to bind again, is not generally accepted, despite the authority of Lactantius, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas,<sup>329</sup> must a religious person not experience his or her freedom as bound by and to what is taken to matter unconditionally and most profoundly, bound, we can say, by what is experienced as sacred? Is it not only such a bond that can give substance to our lives?

What makes life insubstantial is a stepping back from the world that has its foundation in reflection. The devil who robs Peter Schlemihl of his shadow is thus closely related to Goethe’s Mephisto, the spirit who always negates, the ironist, who casts doubt on everything, and thus leads individuals astray by leading them away from their engagement in the world to a preoccupation with self. Such a reflective individual will find it impossible to establish a meaningful relationship with another human being, because he never sees in the other more than an occasion for reflection, for dreams. This is what the Judge means when he calls A a mere observer.

The story of Peter Schlemihl, by the way, ends without Peter ever recovering his shadow. He becomes a natural scientist, who does not feel at home anywhere in the world, traveling across the world in seven-league boots, collecting botanical and geological specimens. The story invites comparison with *Peter Pan*, also with the opera *Die Frau ohne Schatten* by Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, to which I shall return later.

Judge William’s message presupposes his religious convictions, but all of this A of course has to reject. This rejection, however, lets him become spectral, ghostlike, one of the Symparanekromenoi. The aesthetic man considers life an experiment, hopefully an interesting one. Opposed to that view is another that views life as a vocation. This vocation is not something we adopt arbitrarily. It is a fate. The affirmation of that vocation is at the same time an affirmation of who we are.

---

328 Immanuel Kant *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*, Werke, vol. 6, A 31 / B 35.

329 Cf. Lactantius *Divine Institutes*, IV, xxviii; St. Augustine *City of God*, X, iii; St. Thomas *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q. lxxxii, a. 1.

## 3

The Judge goes on to accuse A of making life into an experiment. What is the point of this experiment? Enjoyment that should justify itself. Making life into an experiment, A lets it disintegrate into a collection of interesting situations. Rather than have a fate, A wants to be fate. And A rejects every faith, where we should not think right away of faith in God: we can have faith in another person, faith in our vocation. In each case faith is tied to a commitment. By accusing A of a lack of faith, the Judge accuses him of being uncommitted. He lacks seriousness or, as we put it before, he lives in the subjunctive: “We are astonished to see a clown whose joints are so loose that all the restraints of a man’s gait and posture are annulled. You are like that in an intellectual sense; you can just as well stand on your head as on your feet. Everything is possible for you, and you can surprise yourself and others with this possibility, but it is unhealthy, and for your own peace of mind, I beg you to watch out lest that which is an advantage to you end up becoming a curse. Any man who has a conviction cannot at his pleasure turn himself and everything topsy-turvy in this way.”<sup>330</sup>

## 4

Having attacked A and his view of life and love as an instrument of enjoyment, the Judge goes on to attack an age that has bifurcated love and marriage, an age best expressed in the words of the little seamstress who has this to say about the behavior of gentlemen: “They love us but do not marry us; they do not love the fine ladies, but they marry them.”<sup>331</sup> The marriage of convenience is opposed to the immediacy of love. (Kierkegaard’s understanding of the reality of marriage at mid-century invites comparison with that of Marx.) Marriage, according to this view, has to do with life’s prose.<sup>332</sup> It is dull, boring. Such marriages are characterized by the fact that they are for good reasons; and perhaps the best such reasons are economic considerations. The girl marries a breadwinner, the man an heiress or a housekeeper or an entertainer, or someone to bear him children, ideally all four wrapped into one.

---

330 *EO2*, 16 / *SKS* 3, 25.

331 *EO2*, 28 / *SKS* 3, 36.

332 *EO2*, 27 / *SKS* 3, 35.

Such marriage Kierkegaard considers both immoral and fragile: it is immoral because it reduces the other to a means: by marrying this girl I hope to get ahead, etc. It is fragile because it is conditional. I marry for good reasons; but after a while what I once took to be good reasons may no longer be there. I don't need her any more; the time has come for divorce. The same immorality and fragility attaches of course to a marriage based on a love understood aesthetically, as an instrument of pleasure. There is nothing that assures that I shall always think that this person will serve my desires better than another. Sex qua sex would not seem to be monogamous. Such a marriage, too, is therefore fragile and immoral.

It is precisely this view that led in the nineteenth century to demands that marriage be abolished. The arguments figure in the "Diary" of the Seducer, who brings Cordelia to a point where she wants to terminate the engagement. The model here is the young Friedrich Schlegel.<sup>333</sup> Later, to be sure, Schlegel, too, chooses to get married. Those who attacked marriage opposed to it free love. What counts is the immediacy of such love. The argument here is that love is something natural, not to be weighed down with rules and taboos. The problem with such a naturalization of love is that it tends to rob it of its significance. It ceases to be terribly exciting. What makes love interesting is of course that it is more than just a natural desire; that it is directed towards another person; there is thus inevitably an ethical dimension. All love involves something like dialogue and in every dialogue there is also at least an element of struggle with another individual. The struggle can be conducted in such a way that we do or fail to do justice to the other individual. To take love to be amoral is immoral. "One can say that it [romantic love] has taken two directions, one of which at first glance appears to be a wrong way, that is, immoral; the other one, which is more responsible, nevertheless in my opinion, misses out on what is most profound in love. If, then, love depends upon the sensuous, anyone easily discerns that this immediate, chivalrous faithfulness is foolishness. No wonder, then, that women wish to be emancipated – in our day one of the many unbeautiful phenomena of which the men are guilty. The eternal in love becomes the object of ridicule; the temporal

---

333 Cf. e.g. Friedrich Schlegel *Lucinde*, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, vol. 5, pp. 61–62.

is retained, but the temporal is also refined in a sensuous eternity, in the eternal moment of the embrace.”<sup>334</sup>

What is emancipation? Emancipation is setting free. Why are men responsible for it? And why is the Judge against it? The Judge seems to be afraid that the liberation of woman would be a liberation of woman from herself, i.e. fundamentally a form of self-alienation, which has its foundation in a modern self-understanding that cannot do justice to the body. We live in an age when human beings have freed themselves more and more and in all sorts of different senses. Freed themselves from what and for what? From themselves as concrete human beings? Are human beings first of all disembodied spirits that happen to find themselves in gendered, biologically and socially constructed bodies? The Judge takes it for granted that men by nature live at a greater distance from their bodies than women, are therefore more deeply alienated from themselves.

## 5

Having launched this twofold attack against the Seducer and the reality of marriage in this age, the Judge begins his positive argument to show that marriage is compatible with romantic love. And Kierkegaard, like his Judge, is at heart a romantic: “The first thing I have to do is to orient myself and especially in the defining characteristics of what a marriage is. Obviously, the real constituting element, the substance is love [*Kjærlighed*] – or, if you want to give it a more specific emphasis erotic love [*El-skov*]. Once this is taken away, married life is either merely a satisfaction of sensuous appetite or it is an association, a partnership, with one or another object in mind, but love, whether it is the superstitious, romantic, chivalrous love or the deeper moral, religious love filled with a vigorous and vital conviction, has precisely the conviction of eternity in it.”<sup>335</sup> But, the Judge goes on to say, marriage requires more than love: “Marriage then ought not to call forth erotic love, on the contrary, it presupposes it not as something past but a something present. But marriage has an ethical and religious element that erotic love does not have; for this reason, marriage is based on resignation [*Resignation*], which erotic love does not have. If one is unwilling to assume that in

---

<sup>334</sup> EO2, 22 / SKS 3, 30–31.

<sup>335</sup> EO2, 32 / SKS 3, 40.

his life every person goes through the double movement – first, if I may put it this way, the pagan movement, where erotic love belongs, and then the Christian movement, whose expression is marriage – if one is unwilling to say that erotic love must be excluded from Christianity, then it must be shown that erotic love can be united with marriage.”<sup>336</sup>

What then does the Judge understand by love? The Judge shows how much of a romantic he is when he proudly proclaims that he is fighting under the banner of first love: “First, then, an exploration of erotic love. Here I shall adopt an expression, despite your and the whole world’s mockeries, that nevertheless has always had a beautiful meaning for me: the first love (believe me, I will not yield, and you probably will not either; if so there will be a strange misrelation in our correspondence). When I use this phrase, I think of one of the most beautiful things in life; when you use it, it is the signal that the whole artillery of your observations is firing. But just as for me this phrase has nothing at all ludicrous about it, and just as I, to be honest, tolerate your attack only because I ignore it, so neither does it have for me the sadness that it presumably can have for someone else. This sadness need not be morbid, for the morbid is always something false and mendacious. It is beautiful and healthy if a person has been unfortunate in his first love, has learned to know the pain of it but nevertheless remains faithful to his love, has kept his faith in this first love; it is beautiful if in the course of the years he at times vividly recalls it, and even though his soul has been sufficiently healthy to bid farewell, as it were, to that kind of love in order to dedicate himself to something higher, it is beautiful if he then sadly remembers it as something that was admittedly not perfect but yet was so very beautiful.”<sup>337</sup> But “first” to the Judge cannot quite mean what it means to A in say, “The First Love.” The aesthete thinks the first in opposition to repetition and thus to boredom. And something very much like this would seem to be also the position of the Judge: “The greater the probability that something can be repeated, the less meaning the first has; the less the probability, the greater the meaning; and on the other hand, the more meaningful that is which in its ‘first’ manifests itself for the first time, the less the probability that it can be repeated. Even when it is something eternal, then all probability of its being repeated vanishes. Therefore, if someone has spoken with a tinge of sadness about the

---

336 EO2, 36 / SKS 3, 43–44.

337 EO2, 36–37 / SKS 3, 44.

first love, as if it can never be repeated, this is no minimizing of love but the most profound eulogy on it as the eternal power.”<sup>338</sup>

The use of “first” here invites thoughts of the incarnation. The vertical of the eternal here intersects everyday horizontal time. The “first” thus ceases to be used just temporally. The Judge asks us to live, more precisely to love in such a way, that our love is always for the first time in the sense that every great work of art touches us anew with its original power. For the Judge it is only in this way that love can be genuine. To be sure, the Judge, too, knows that there is a sense in which love is accidental: I could have loved another. Objectively the view that the lovers were destined for each other seems silly. But love singles out this individual, makes him or her unique, no longer one of many possible individuals. Love therefore does not compare, does not have something else in view as the instrumental view always does. If I do not look at an individual in this way, I do not love: “I contrast to this, the first love is an absolute awakening, an absolute intuiting, and this must be held fixed lest a wrong be done to it. It is directed upon a single specific actual object, which alone exists for it; nothing else exists at all.”<sup>339</sup> The romantic would be willing to accept much of this, but too often this love is interpreted as a quasi-natural event. Kierkegaard’s Judge, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of freedom: “But just as the nature of all love is a unity of freedom and necessity, so also here. The individual feels himself free in this necessity, feels his own individual energy in it, feels precisely in this the possession of everything he is. That is why it is unmistakably observable in every person whether he has truly been in love. There is a transfiguration, an apotheosis in it that endured throughout his whole life.”<sup>340</sup> The absolute alertness Kierkegaard is thinking of cannot be thought apart from an act of will, apart from freedom. And freedom here implies the strength to let the other be, freedom for the other.

---

338 *EO2*, 40 / *SKS* 3, 47.

339 *EO2*, 42 / *SKS* 3, 49.

340 *EO2*, 43 / *SKS* 3, 50.

## 6

But why marriage? Why make love, which, it would seem, is something private by its very nature, into something public by getting married before God and the congregation? In this the religious and the social aspect of marriage finds expression. It is this that the aesthete finds particularly objectionable. And indeed looking at what so many marriage ceremonies have become – I have come to speak of “Winnie the Pooh weddings” in honor of a couple that personalized their marriage ceremony by asking that a number of poems from Winnie the Pooh, coupled with some Indian love songs, be included – and at the silly comments that so often are part of such ceremonies, that today seem almost an essential part of such ceremonies, one could argue with some justice that the ceremony is indeed something rather silly.

But back to Kierkegaard. For his Judge the fact that the marriage ceremony places that marriage before God is an expression of the fact that the couple is not self-sufficient. One human being cannot be everything for the other; nor can he or she expect the other to be everything for him or her and only for him or her. It is indeed a temptation to think that by getting married to another person we gain in some sense possession of that person. She or he cannot do without me; needs me, owes everything to me. In all such expression the partner is seen as someone who cannot stand alone, as someone who does not really possess him – or herself, whom I possess. But only someone who in this sense does not need the other can let the other be what he or she is, can be alert to or free for the other as demanded. To truly love the other we may not need the other. Part of love is this strength to let the other be. And as part of the meaning of first love is freedom, the freedom of the other must be safeguarded. And just this is accomplished by getting married before God. “The man’s most besetting weakness is that he has made a conquest of the girl he loves; it makes him feel his superiority, but this is in no way esthetic. When, however, he thanks God, he humbles himself under his love, and it is truly far more beautiful to take the beloved as a gift from God’s hand than to have subdued the whole world in order to make a conquest of her. Add to this that the person who truly loves will find no rest for his soul until he has humbled himself before God in this way, and the girl he loves means too much to him to dare take her, even in the most beautiful and noble sense, as

booty.”<sup>341</sup> And speaking of woman: “Now when she thanks God for the beloved, her soul is safeguarded from suffering; by being able to thank God, she places enough distance between herself and her beloved so that she can, so to speak, breathe. And this does not happen as the result of an alarming doubt – she knows no such thing – but it happens immediately.”<sup>342</sup> To sum up: love is truly love only when it is strong enough to let the other be. But this requires the strength to be what I am without the other. In this sense I do not need the other. And yet, as the fiasco of the aesthetic life is supposed to have shown, the human individual is not free to endow his life with meaning, must accept this meaning as something given. This he does when he sees life not as an experiment, but as a vocation. But to see life as a vocation is to see it as a task to which I have in some sense been called. He who calls me is God.

## 7

Implicit in the observation that one may not need the person one really loves is another: there is no real answer to the question: why should I get married? If there were a good answer, the meaning of love would be destroyed. The only reason for marriage is love; we get married because we love. But love is an unconditional commitment to accept and be open towards the other. For this reason, there can be no condition that could arise and justify a one-sided breaking of the commitment. To be sure, marriages break down. But such a break-down on this view always involves a moral failure. And this failure is precisely the unwillingness to be unconditionally committed to and open to the other. I take it that this was one reason Kierkegaard would not get married. He thought himself incapable of such openness. Even the engagement was a moral failure.

Marriage thus has its teleology within itself. In this sense a good marriage is like a work of art, the married life like the aesthetic life.<sup>343</sup> But unlike the life of the aesthete, marriage does not lead away from re-

---

341 *EO2*, 57 / *SKS* 3, 63.

342 *EO2*, 57–58 / *SKS* 3, 63.

343 Cf. *EO2*, 88 / *SKS* 3, 91, where the judge writes: “As a result of this exploration, I can stress here that marriage, in order to be esthetic and religious, must have no finite ‘why,’ but this was precisely the esthetic in the first love, and thus here again marriage stands *au niveau* [on a level] with first love.”

ality, away from time. This is what makes marriage more interesting: the encounter with a real person is more interesting than the encounter with a fiction: this is why the aesthetic life took the form of a seduction.

What then does the marriage ceremony accomplish? “What does the marriage ceremony do, then? ‘It halts the lovers.’ Not at all – but it allows what is already in motion to appear in the external world. It affirms the universally human, and in this sense sin also, but all the anxiety and torment that wishes that sin had never come into the world is based on a reflection that first love does not know. To wish that sin had never entered the world is to lead mankind back to the more imperfect. Sin has come in, but when the individuals have humbled themselves under this they stand higher than they stood before.”<sup>344</sup> The wedding ceremony binds together particular and universal. In getting married before God human beings accept marriage as part of their vocation: God established marriage because it is not good for man to be alone.<sup>345</sup> But if love is part of our vocation, such love is not love of spirit and spirit, but the love of concrete, embodied selves, of a man and a woman. And this love points beyond these two individuals to the children they may have. This relates their present mutual commitment to the future. To many readers, indeed even to Kierkegaard himself, this is difficult to accept. “Now, even if some scoffer at religion consider somewhat dubious the company that commenced by plunging the man into corruption, this proves nothing, and I would rather cite this event as a motto for all marriages, because not until the woman had done this was the most intimate association strengthened between them.”<sup>346</sup> The passage invites a look at St. Augustine, who in the *City of God* tells us that Adam sinned with open eyes, because he preferred to be together with Eve in sin, than to be alone with God.<sup>347</sup> Kierkegaard might have done well pondering these lines.<sup>348</sup> Instructive, too, is a look at the very end of Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium*, which reminds us that for us mortals it is better to make love to another mortal and to

---

344 EO2, 93 / SKS 2, 95–96.

345 EO2, 70 / SKS 2, 74.

346 *Ibid.*

347 St. Augustin *The City of God*, Book XIV, p. 459.

348 Kierkegaard owned Augustine’s complete works (*Augustini Aurelii Opera. Opera et studio Monachorum Ordinis S. Bened. e Congregat*, vols. 1–18, edited by S. Mauri, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Venice: Bassani 1797–1807; Ktl. 117–134). For a comprehensive overview of the possible influence of Augustine on Kierkegaard, cf. Robert Puchniak “Kierkegaard’s Tempered Admiration of Augustine.”

give birth than to be alone in blissful contemplation of pure beauty.<sup>349</sup> Or consider, “Children belong to the innermost, hidden life of the family, and to this bright-dark mysteriousness one ought to direct every earnest or God-fearing thought to this subject. But then it will also appear that every child has a halo about its head; every father will also feel that there is more in the child than what it owes to him. Yes, he will feel that it is a trust and that in the beautiful sense of the word he is only a step-father. The father who has not felt this has always taken in vain this dignity as a father.”<sup>350</sup> It is difficult not to feel a bit sorry for the author of these lines.

I began by discussing Peter Schlemihl and in this connection I mentioned also *Die Frau ohne Schatten* by Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. In conclusion let me return to the opera. The woman’s lack of a shadow there is tied to the fact that the Empress is the daughter

---

349 Cf. *Symposium*, 212a. It may seem odd to refer to the end of Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium*. Would she not have love lead the lover beyond all that is temporal and therefore corruptible? “What may we suppose to be the felicity of the man who sees absolute beauty in its essence, pure and unalloyed, who, instead of a beauty tainted by human flesh and color and a mass of perishable rubbish, is able to apprehend divine beauty where it exists apart and alone.”

At this point it looks as if Diotima had severed, split off, a higher from a lower love, a contemplative from a procreative eros. But is this really the case? The very ending of her speech lets us wonder: “Do you not see that in that region alone where he sees beauty with the faculty capable of seeing it, will he be able to bring forth not mere reflected images of goodness but true goodness, because he will be in contact not with a reflection, but with the truth? And having brought forth and nurtured true goodness he will have the privilege of being beloved by God, and becoming, if ever man can, immortal himself” (212a).

We should note that Diotima is not praising here the life of someone lost in contemplation of true beauty, but someone, who puts this vision to work by giving birth and nurturing something beautiful. The gods may find satisfaction in pure contemplation. Our lot would appear to be a different one. We humans have to place procreative eros, albeit perhaps in a highly sublimated form, above contemplative eros. We return to Diotima’s earlier insight that the object of love is not beauty but to give birth in beauty. We should also keep in mind the ending of Aristophanes’ speech, which admonished mortals to affirm their fragmented state and the love appropriate to it. The ending of Diotima’s speech may be taken as a reminder that human beings should not forsake procreation in many different senses for aesthetic or perhaps mystical contemplation.

350 *EO2*, 72–73 / *SKS* 3, 77.

of the king of the spirits. And as long as the Empress remains without a shadow she must remain barren and the Emperor turn to stone.

Like Kierkegaard's Judge, Hofmannsthal suggests here that a life that sees sex, as the aesthete does, as only an instrument of pleasure fails to do justice to the whole human being. Marriage, if it is genuine, is a surrender of that pride that lets us use the body of another and our own bodies a mere means to present enjoyment. It expresses a commitment to a future that extends beyond the lives of the individuals. The most natural expression of this commitment is the desire to have children.

The aesthete has difficulty even understanding such a desire. He does not see why there should be a link between sex and the having of children and he would no doubt have rejoiced in the fact that medical technology has allowed us to sever that link. From the aesthetic point of view children are an unwanted byproduct that denies closure to an otherwise beautiful affair. The aesthete wants to use his body; he does not want to be subservient to his body. Children threaten a loss of independence.

In *Die Frau ohne Schatten* the possession of a shadow is linked to the ability to have children. It is this that gives to love a significance that extends beyond the present into the future. Only by committing herself to the as yet unborn children does the Empress become fully human and save the Emperor from turning to stone. The opera ends with a chorus, written in self-conscious competition with the chorus that concludes Goethe's *Faust*, sung by the unborn children:

Vater, dir drohet nichts  
 siehe es schwindet schon,  
 Mutter, das Ängstliche,  
 das euch beirrte

Wäre denn je ein Fest,  
 wären nichts insgeheim  
 wir die Geladenen,  
 Wir auch die Wirte!<sup>351</sup>

The festival of love is a genuine festival only when the unborn children are both invited and do the inviting. And if Hofmannsthal is right, without such festivals we shall lose our shadows.

What then is a festival? A festival is a special sacred time, marked off from more normal, secular times, a time when we are more open than

---

351 Hugo von Hofmannsthal *Die Frau Ohne Schatten*. *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. XXV.1, pp. 78–79.

we usually are to our vocation. Festivals return us to what we essentially are. In this sense, Hofmannsthal suggests, genuine love is a festival.

## 11. Two Concepts of Freedom

### 1

“Love and marriage,” we are told, “go together like a horse and carriage.” The Judge’s admonitions to A could be understood as an extended commentary on this bit of homely wisdom.

In unpacking the link, the Judge, as we have seen, depends on the analogy between a successful marriage and a successful work of art, the same analogy, that is, that informs A’s understanding of a successful seduction or, more generally, of the successful life. Last time I thus pointed out that the ethical and the aesthetic life have considerable similarity: both should have their teleology within themselves, we are told. In this respect they are both rather like works of art: just as the artist takes some material and, by giving it a certain form, a definite structure, creates a work of art, so the aesthetic individual develops the material with which life furnishes him, develops the occasions that provide his compositions with, as it were, their theme; and in a similar way the Judge would have us develop the immediacy of love.

Love then is for the Judge the material, marriage the form. Both are necessary. And looked at in the image of the work of art, married love, he can claim with good reason, is aesthetically superior to a seduction. “This much stand established between us: considered as an element, marital love [*Kjærlighed*] is not only just as beautiful as the first but even more beautiful, because in its immediacy it contains a unity in several contrasts. Thus it is not true that marriage is an exceedingly respectable but tiresomely moral role and that erotic love [*Elskov*] is poetry; no, marriage is really the poetic.”<sup>352</sup> This superiority is tied to a different relationship to time: “What the first love lacks, then, is the second esthetic ideal, the historical.”<sup>353</sup> And again and again the Judge will come to speak of the different way in which married and aesthetic or romantic love attempt to cope with time. “You are continuously fighting, even though in quite another sense, yet just like the Spanish knight, for a by-

---

352 EO2, 96 / SKS 3, 98–99.

353 EO2, 96 / SKS 3, 99.

gone time. Since you are in fact fighting for the moment against time, you are actually always fighting for what has disappeared.”<sup>354</sup>

The aesthete thinks satisfaction in opposition to time. And something like that would seem to be also true of married love: “Marital love, then, has its enemy in time, its victory in time, its eternity in time – therefore, even if I were to imagine away all its so-called outer and inner trials, it would always have its task.”<sup>355</sup> But there is also a decisive difference: to dramatize that difference between the two the Judge opposes a knight to the married man: “To hold on to the subject we are most concerned with, let us imagine a romantic love. Imagine, then, a knight who has slain five wild boars, four dwarfs, has freed three princes from a spell, brothers of the princess he adores. To the romantic mentality, this has its perfect reality. But to the artist and poet it is of no importance whatever whether there are five or only four. On the whole the artist is more limited than the poet, but even the latter has no interest in describing punctiliously what happened in the slaying of each particular boar. He hastens on to the moment. Perhaps he curtails the number, focuses the hardships and dangers in poetic intensity and speeds on to the moment, the moment of possession. To him the entire historical sequence is of minor importance.”<sup>356</sup> In opposition to the knight who kills time, the married man is said by the Judge to rescue and preserve it in eternity: “He has not fought with lions and trolls, but with the most dangerous enemy, which is time. But now eternity does not come afterward, as for the knight, but he has had eternity in time. Therefore only he has been victorious over time, for it may be said of the knight that he has killed time, just as one to whom time has no reality always wishes to kill time, but this is never the right victory. Like a true victor, the married man has not killed time, but has rescued and preserved it in eternity. The married man who does this is truly living poetically; he solves the great riddle to live in eternity and yet to hear the cabinet clock strike in such a way that the striking does not shorten, but lengthen his eternity, a contradiction that is just as profound as, but more glorious than, the one in the familiar situation described in a story from the Middle Ages about a

---

354 *EO2*, 140–141 / *SKS 3*, 139.

355 *EO2*, 139 / *SKS 3*, 137–138.

356 *EO2*, 134 / *SKS 3*, 133.

poor wretch who woke up in hell and shouted, ‘What time is it?’ – whereupon the devil answered, ‘Eternity.’”<sup>357</sup>

## 2

Since both A and the Judge rely on the art analogy, their disagreement invites consideration of the relationship between beauty and time. Let me return then to the analogy: works of art are said to have their teleology within themselves. What does it mean to say of something that it has its teleology within itself? One thing this implies is that it cannot be justified with an appeal to something outside itself. It is autotelic. Traditionally this is how the successful work of art has been described. Art is for art’s sake. We know that the work of art is significant, without being able to say just what it is that makes it so. Kant speaks in this connection of purposiveness without a purpose.<sup>358</sup> In the end we cannot say of the beautiful work of art just why it should be the way it is. Not that it therefore strikes us as arbitrary. We have a sense of purposiveness without being able to specify the purpose. A real work of art cannot be exhausted by explanation. It is inexponible.

But is not all immediate enjoyment autotelic in this sense, does it not have its teleology within itself? Take, for example, eating a good meal. The question, “why do we eat?” can of course be answered with a reference to hunger, survival, etc. But often such answers will prove quite unsatisfactory: we could have satisfied our hunger more simply and economically. We eat because it gives us pleasure, because we enjoy it. And if someone asks: “why do you enjoy it?” I could only answer: “I just enjoy it, that’s all.” Enjoyment is its own justification. Something like such a recognition of the self-justifying character of pleasure provides utilitarianism with its foundation. In this sense A is not altogether unlike a utilitarian such as Bentham. But must something like that not be said of the good life: that it has its teleology within itself. Meister Eckhart comes to mind: “If anyone went on for a thousand years asking of life: ‘Why are you living?’ life, if it could answer, would only say: ‘I live so that I may live.’ That is because life lives out of its own ground and springs from its own source, and so it lives without

---

357 EO2, 138–139 / SKS 3, 137.

358 Cf. the “Third Moment” of Kant’s *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, *Werke*, vol. 5, §§ 10–17.

asking why it is itself living. If anyone asked a truthful man who works out of his own ground: ‘Why are you performing your works?’ and if he were to give a straight answer, he would only say, ‘I work so that I may work.’”<sup>359</sup>

There is, to be sure, a gulf that separates A and the Judge: what separates them would seem to be first of all the way A experiences the terror of time, the terror of history: “Therefore what you abhor under the name of habit as inescapable in marriage is simply its historical quality, which in your perverse eyes takes on such a terrifying look.”<sup>360</sup> A would find eating and playing push-pin rather boring. What makes them so is their repetitive nature. For him, too, the task is to hold on to the mystery of the first. But just that mystery is destroyed when actions become habitual: “The first thing you will name is ‘habit, the unavoidable habit, this dreadful monotony, the everlasting *Einerlei* [*sameness*] in the alarming still life of marital domesticity. I love nature, but I am a hater of second nature.’ It must be granted that you know how to describe with seductive fervor and sadness the happy time when one is still making discoveries and how to paint with anxiety and horror the time when it is over.”<sup>361</sup> To answer A, the Judge needs to rescue the inevitably repetitive structure of marriage from this characterization: “The first thing I must now protest against is your right to use the word ‘habit’ for the recurring that characterizes all life and therefore love also. ‘Habit’ is properly used only of evil in such a way that by it one designates either a continuance in something that in itself is evil or such a stubborn repetition of something in itself innocent that it becomes somewhat evil because of this repetition. Thus habit always designates something unfree. But just as one cannot do good, except in freedom, so also one

---

359 Meister Eckhart “In hoc apparuit charitas dei in nobis,” *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, p. 184. According to the auction-catalogue, Kierkegaard did not own any works by Meister Eckhart, but he heard about him from Hans Lassen Martensen’s lectures on speculative dogmatics, and also owned the latter’s dissertation on Eckhart, *Mester Eckhart. Et Bidrag til at oplyse Middelalderens Mystik*; English translation Hans L. Martensen *Meister Eckhart: A Study in Speculative Theology*. Peter Šajda, who also provides an overview of the historical sources for Kierkegaard’s knowledge of Eckhart, points out that the discussion of mysticism in volume two of *Either/Or* (EO2, 241–246 / SKS 3, 230–235) is likely inspired by Martensen’s account of Meister Eckhart (Peter Šajda “Meister Eckhart: The Patriarch of German Speculation Who Was a *Lebemeister*,” pp. 245–247).

360 EO2, 140 / SKS 3, 138.

361 EO2, 125–126 / SKS 3, 125.

cannot remain in it except in freedom, and therefore we can never speak of habit in relation to the good."<sup>362</sup>

## 3

A tries to kill time. But has not something rather like that often been said of the beautiful: that it lifts the burden of time. That certainly is Schopenhauer's analysis and with good reason Schopenhauer can point to Kant's understanding of the beautiful as object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction as his most immediate source.<sup>363</sup> And is this not at bottom why the Seducer seduces and resists marriage: to fight time? There is a sense in which the seduction, too, is not for anything else. Like a work of art it has its teleology within itself. In this respect it is more like play than like work. Work never has its teleology within itself. It is for a purpose. We can always judge work by its results. Play does not worry about results. It is self-justifying. Working, the human being subordinates his life to an end outside himself; playing, on the other hand, he is at one with himself. Precisely because of this, play is to be placed higher than work. Being weighed down by duties, marriage, A might say, is too much like work, not enough like play. Eckhart's truthful man, to be sure, would not know how to distinguish work from play.

To say that A tries to kill time is to say also that he wants to live and see things *sub specie aeternitatis*, as opposed to the way reflection lets us see things, *sub specie possibilitatis*. In the immediacy of the moment A seeks to recover eternity. Reflection, he knows, destroys immediacy, threatens thus the immediacy of enjoyment. As I reflect on something it tends to become questionable: why was I born? Why did I get married to this girl? Why not try something else? Why am I eating the same old things? Why not try something else for a change? And why seduce? Why not join some religious group? Reflection shows that in all these cases there is no good reason. Reflection reveals the accidental. That I was born was an accident. That I married this person was an accident. All of life seems a series of accidents without higher significance. Re-

---

362 EO2, 127 / SKS 3, 127.

363 Cf. Arthur Schopenhauer *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung, Werke*, vol. 1, § 52, pp. 352–353; and Immanuel Kant *Kritik der Urtheilskraft, Werke*, vol. 5, §§ 1–5.

reflection invites me to look at my situation objectively, i. e. as a spectator, and precisely because of this threatens to annul its meaning. Thus when Camus begins *The Myth of Sisyphus* with the observation that our situation is absurd, that there is no justification for it,<sup>364</sup> he opposes himself to Meister Eckhart's truthful man by assuming such a reflective attitude: life now appears as meaningless – A might say, it is seen as boring. With Kundera we may want to speak of “the unbearable lightness of being.”<sup>365</sup>

No one, to be sure, is completely reflective. Even the nihilist lives immediately and so living enjoys a great many things. In the immediacy of enjoyment he can forget his despair. Recall A's description of what Faust sought in Gretchen.<sup>366</sup> And in this connection we should not forget that reflection itself is often enjoyable. There are thus stages of the immediate as A points out. A seeks an immediacy higher than reflection.

One problem with A's entire project is that while it celebrates moments that are enjoyed, life as a whole does not thereby become meaningful. It rather threatens to disintegrate into a series of unconnected, pleasurable events. Despair is not defeated, but momentarily suspended. And just as in the midst of a party we can suddenly become reflective and recognize how silly the whole thing is, so despair can awaken at any time and kill enjoyment. (I know of no place where I am more likely to be assaulted by such despair than at the so-called “smoker” at the annual American Philosophical Association meeting.)

A tries to counteract this lack of continuity by having enjoyment cast a light over a longer period of time. Precisely because of this, he prefers a drawn-out seduction over a brief love affair. Like a successful piece of music or an Aristotelian tragedy, a successful seduction should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. The flow of events is transformed into a structure and thus annulled. Time has been killed. The Judge tells us that a man inevitably wishes to kill time when it has no reality for him. Reflection reveals time to be the enemy. To repeat: the aesthetic project thinks all value against time. That is why it cannot accept history as it is.

---

364 Cf. Albert Camus *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. 6–9.

365 Cf. Milan Kundera *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

366 EO1, 206 / SKS 2, 201.

## 4

And yet the aesthetic individual has shown us something important: he has shown us that structure need not be the enemy of immediacy. The aesthetic life tries to preserve immediacy, but with the help of structure, extend its power to illuminate our lives through time. Life is to be lived as a work of art. Perhaps it would be more precise to liken it to a piece of music, or perhaps better still to a play.

Most of this is also true of marriage. Marriage, too, develops the immediacy of romantic love, gives it a structure, and by means of this structure extends it through time, thus giving it permanence. There is, to be sure, this important difference: marriage is dialectic; the aesthetic life is an extended monologue. Marriage demands resignation and commitment; the aesthetic life is ruled by pride. The two points are related.

It is pride that makes it easy for the aesthete to conquer, but impossible to really possess the other: “For the most part, true art goes in the direction opposite to that of nature, without therefore annihilating it, and likewise true art manifests itself in possessing and not in making a conquest; in other words, possessing is an inverse conquering. In this phrase you already perceive to what extent art and nature struggle against each other. The person who possesses has indeed also something that has been taken in conquest – in fact, if the expressions are to be used strictly, one can say that only he who possesses makes a conquest. Now, very likely you also suppose that you do have possession, for you do have the moment of possession, but that is no possession, for that is not appropriation in the deeper sense. For example, if I imagine a conqueror who subjugated kingdoms and countries, he would have great possessions, and yet one would call such a prince a conquering and not a possessing prince. Only when he guided these countries with wisdom to what was best for them, only then would he possess them. This is rarely found in a conquering nature; ordinarily such a person lacks the humility, the religiousness, the genuine humanity needed in order to possess.”<sup>367</sup> But we should note that the Judge’s understanding of possession here, too, links it to conquest, even if of a far more humane sort, concerned for the wellbeing of the other. He wants to take care of the other, but in English “taking care of someone” is ominously ambiguous. Think of a Mafioso who announces that he has taken care of

---

367 *EO1*, 131 / *SKS* 3, 130.

someone. Is that ambiguity altogether removed by the Judge's understanding of possession? "Now, if you keep on declaring that you, for better or for worse, are indeed conquestive by nature, it makes no difference to me, for you must nevertheless grant me that it is greater to possess than to conquer. When a person conquers, he is continually forgetting himself; when he possesses, he recollects himself – not as a futile pastime but in all possible earnestness."<sup>368</sup> Self-centered as it is, self-assertive pride yet threatens a loss of self.

## 5

Let me approach what the Judge has to tell us by taking a closer look at the different concepts of freedom presupposed. A would argue that the aesthetic life is the only life really appropriate to a free person. The aesthetic individual has freed himself from God, from society, from nature. Reflection and irony have made him carefree. And precisely because not bound by any care he is free to manipulate. A's freedom could thus be described negatively as a freedom from care. But such freedom is incompatible with the kind of openness that belongs to genuine love: "To be sure it is said that love opens the individuality, but not if love is understood as it is in romanticism, since it is only brought to a point where he is supposed to be open, and there it ends, or he is about to open, but is interrupted."<sup>369</sup> Implicit in aesthetic freedom is a failure or a refusal to be open to and to recognize the claims that other human beings have on us. To be carefree is to be lonely. His pride renders A irresponsible, unable to respond.

The Judge has a very different understanding of freedom: to be free is to be free, not of care, but of need. Precisely because I know that at bottom I do not need the other, I am free to be open to the other, to let the other be what he or she is, where we should question the rhetoric of possession of which the Judge, too, is fond (cf. the rhetoric of "My" – "My Cordelia"). To be free in this sense does not mean to be unable to care, nor should such freedom be thought in opposition to duty. Quite the opposite. Such freedom founds the most profound responsibility, i. e. response-ability, the ability to respond; and such response-ability founds the responsibility that the Judge takes to be inseparable from

---

<sup>368</sup> *EO2*, 132 / *SKS* 3, 131.

<sup>369</sup> *EO2*, 135 / *SKS* 3, 134.

genuine love: “Now if your position that duty is the enemy of love was like that, it was merely an innocent misunderstanding, then it would go with you as with the man of whom we speak; but your view is a misunderstanding and also a guilty misunderstanding. That is why you disparage not only duty but also love; that is why duty appears to be an unconquerable enemy, precisely because duty loves true love and has a mortal hatred of the false kind – indeed kills it. When the individuals are in the truth, they will see in duty only the external sign that the road to eternity is prepared for them and it is the road they are eager to take; they are not only permitted to take it, but are commanded to take it, and over this road there watches a divine providence that continually shows them the prospect and places signposts at all the danger spots. Why should the person who truly loves be unwilling to accept a divine authorization because it expresses itself divinely and does not say only ‘You may’ but says ‘You shall’? In duty the road is all cleared for the lovers, and therefore I believe that in language the expression of duty is in the future tense in order thereby to indicate the historical.”<sup>370</sup>

## 6

The Judge, as we have seen, opposes conquest to possession. A seeks to conquer, seeks to establish himself as the godlike master of his world. This is just how Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* describes the fundamental project of the human being.<sup>371</sup> That is why A seeks to reduce that world to a picture that owes its significance to him. He places himself before that picture, entertains himself with it. A is an observer, who by his look seeks to reduce the other to the status of an object, where just this reduction lets him experience his own power. But just this betrays his dependence on the other.

The Judge, on the other hand, would claim not so much to look, as to listen, where listening means openness to what the other is and has to say. Listening is more dialectic than looking. Listening responds to a transcendence beyond us, to God or another individual, and in this sense we may want to speak of a seeing that is really a listening. Martin

---

370 EO2, 149 / SKS 3, 147.

371 Jean-Paul Sartre *Being and Nothingness*, p. 566. Kierkegaard, it should be noted, attributes a similar project to the German Romantics in *The Concept of Irony* (CI, 282 / SKS 1, 318).

Buber tried to point towards such a listening seeing with his I-Thou structure.<sup>372</sup>

The Seducer's look, on the other hand, has an I-it structure. He tries to reduce all transcendent realities into objects that have reality only for him. In this sense he repeats the sin of Aristophanes' circlemen in Plato's *Symposium*.

A's despair, and the despair of the aesthetic person generally, is linked to their inability to respond to the other; or if you wish, it is linked to a refusal of transcendence. In this connection we should note that Kierkegaard takes a philosopher such as Hegel to remain in the aesthetic mode.<sup>373</sup> The world provides such a philosopher with countless occasions to weave together into his system. In this all of history is supposed to be *aufgehoben*, that wonderful German word – Hegel owed it to Schiller – that means both canceled and preserved. Kierkegaard is more alert to the canceling. To observe the world and to transform it into an objective system is inevitably to fail to preserve the otherness of the other.

And in this sense science, too, could be said to be subject to the aesthetic. The other is recognized, only to be assigned a place in some logical or verbal space, in some narrative or other. But to be open to the other means also to be open to the otherness of the other, to be open to the other as this unique individual. Someone who really is in love is thus finally not in love with a good or bad, beautiful or ugly, smart or stupid person. Love does not categorize this way. What matters to love is this concrete, unique, embodied self.

To be open to the other is to be ready for a response, is to be ready for communication. But communication requires a medium. And love, which could be said to be the highest form of communication, also requires a medium. The fault of the romantics, according to the Judge, is that they envision a love that requires no medium. The lovers drown, so to speak, in the immediacy of the embrace. But this view of love fails to recognize that love here has to become so indefinite and abstract as to become all but meaningless. In such an embrace there is ideally no distance between lover and beloved. The individuals are annulled. Consider Tristan and Isolde as Wagner celebrated them. As the individual cannot live as an individual on the level of immediacy, love, so understood,

---

372 Martin Buber "Ich und Du." Kierkegaard's relation to Buber has been explored by Pia Søltøft in her study, *Svimmelhedens Etik*, esp. pp. 47–82.

373 In this context, cf. also Alfred Baeumler *Das Irrationalitätsproblem*, p. 16.

has to turn into death, a fitting end for a love that at bottom seeks to escape from the self.

Consider, on the other hand, a lover who buys a present for the person he or she loves. Why does such a lover do it? Is it a means he uses to achieve some end? In that case the buying of the present is other than just an expression of the love. But is it possible to think of the buying of such a present as just that? Just as an expression of happiness can find expression in a song or a shout or a jump – I still remember when I learned that the expression “to jump for joy” was more than just a metaphor: We had taken a four year old boy to Yale’s Peabody Museum to see the dinosaurs. For a few minutes he was fixed to just one place, jumping up and down. He jumped for joy.

To distinguish the two ways of buying a present we might draw on a concept that Kierkegaard develops in a later work: “Purity of Heart,” he tells us, “Is to Will One Thing.”<sup>374</sup> The Seducer, were he to buy Cordelia a present, would use it as a weapon. He would be willing two things. Were he really to love he could give no reason for his actions. The buying of the present would be just another expression of his love, like a loving word, like jumping for joy, just a way of making his love overt.

And the same should be true of the conversation of lovers. Such conversation, too, can be a weapon, and as such the Seducer uses it, as he tells us. He is no doubt a splendid conversationalist. Conversation for him would seem to be rather like a fencing match. By contrast the talk of most lovers is generally quite silly. That presumably would also hold for the conversations going on between Judge William and his wife. I suspect that almost all love letters by people who really are in love are much too boring to get published. Publishable love letters are the work of individuals who dream of, or are in love with, being in love, are the work of aesthetes, of poets.

## 7

Once we recognize the relation between the medium and the immediacy of love, we are in a position to understand why the Judge can argue that marriage and the duty to love the other on which it insists does not destroy true love, but rather is demanded by it. Marriage is not one

---

<sup>374</sup> *UD*, 24 / *SKS* 8, 138.

thing and love another. If that were so, the Judge would have to consider marriage an immoral institution. But like freedom, love, too, demands a medium that provides it with the necessary structure and binds it. Both are inseparably bound up with responsibility understood as response-ability, the ability to respond. This is what gives marriage its religious significance: by binding human freedom it allows it to become truly itself.

## 12. The Meaning of “Either-Or”

### 1

The title of the work we are reading is *Either/Or* and *Either/Or* is also the topic with which the Judge begins his second letter: “My friend, What I have said so often to you I say once again, or, more exactly, I shout it to you: *Either/Or*, *aut/aut*, for the introduction of a single corrective *aut* does not clarify the matter. Inasmuch as the subject under discussion is too significant for anyone to be satisfied with just part of it and in itself too coherent to be capable of being possessed in part. There are conditions of life in which it would be ludicrous or a kind of derangement to apply an *Either/Or*, but there are also people whose souls are too dissolute to comprehend the implications of such a dilemma, whose personalities lack the energy to be able to say with pathos: *Either/Or*.”<sup>375</sup> The Judge speaks of the significance of *either/or* to stress the importance of choice. To really choose is to face an *either/or*. And the act of choosing, he points out, challenging A, is the proper expression of the ethical: “...you become erect and more jocular than ever and make yourself and others happy with your gospel *vanitas vanitatum* [vanity of vanities all is vanity], hurrah! But this is no choice; it is what we say in Danish: *Lad gaae* [Let it pass]! Or it is a compromise like making five an even number. Now you feel yourself to be free; tell the world ‘Farewell.’

So zieh ich hin in alle Ferne  
Über meiner Mütze nur die Sterne.  
[So I move on to places afar,  
Above my cap only the stars].

With that you have chosen – not, of course, as you yourself will probably acknowledge, the better part; but you have not actually chosen at all, or you have chosen in a figurative sense. Your choice is an esthetic choice. On the whole, to choose is an intrinsic and stringent term for the ethical. Wherever in the stricter sense there is a question of an *Either/Or*, one can always be sure that the ethical has something to do

---

375 *EO2*, 157 / *SKS* 3, 155.

with it. The only absolute Either/Or is the choice between good and evil, but this is also absolutely ethical."<sup>376</sup> The passage lets one think of Dostoevsky's Man from the Underground, who in the name of freedom opposes to  $2+2=4$   $2+2=5$ , which he considers sometimes a very good thing, too.<sup>377</sup>

An ethical action is decided on in full awareness of the alternative, of the possibility to do otherwise. To choose is to limit oneself, to rule out certain possibilities, and just this gives the choice its weight. Choice consolidates the person. Someone who acts without really facing the renunciation involved in every real choice, without asking himself "why not this, why that?" is not really choosing. Such a person cannot be ethical. This is not to say that he is therefore immoral, for the immoral falls under the category of the ethical.

And yet, does A's unwillingness to face up to choice, his running away from choice, not involve something like choice? Is it not also something willed? When the Judge confronts A with his either/or, he suggests that A can choose to become ethical. But that presupposes that in some sense A already falls under the category of the ethical and that it precisely is this that lets him become guilty. In this sense, too, an individual who tries to regain the immediacy and irresponsibility of childhood is immoral, not amoral.

By choosing, a human being prevents himself from losing his way in the merely possible. But in so far as the aesthetic life is a play with possibilities, it has to shun every genuine either/or. A does not want to have to choose, understands choice as a threat to freedom. Freedom, to be sure, is a presupposition of choice: at issue here is the dialectic of choice and freedom.

Note the way the Judge, with his either/or, distances himself from Hegel: "The polemical conclusion, from which all your paeans over existence resonate, has a strange similarity to modern philosophy's pet theory that the principle of contradiction is canceled. I am well aware that the position you take is anathema to philosophy, and yet it seems to me that it is itself guilty of the same error; indeed, the reason this is not immediately detected is that it is not even as properly situated as you are. You are situated in the area of action, philosophy in the area of contemplation. As soon as it is moved into the area of practice, it must arrive at the same conclusion as you do, even though it does not

---

<sup>376</sup> EO2, 166–167 / SKS 3, 163.

<sup>377</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky *Notes from Underground*, p. 24

express it in the same way. You mediate the contradictions in a higher lunacy, philosophy in a higher unity. You turn towards the future, for action is essentially future tense; you say: I can either do this or do that, but whichever I do is equally absurd – *ergo*, I do nothing at all. Philosophy turns towards the past, towards the totality of experienced world history; it shows how the discursive elements come together in a higher unity; it mediates and mediates. It seems to me, however, that it does not answer the question I am asking, for I am asking about the future. In a way you do answer, even though your answer is nonsense.”<sup>378</sup> A does not want to have to choose. The Judge, on the other hand, by getting married did choose and can say of himself that he has experienced the significance of choice. “Partly to tease you a little, partly because it actually is my most cherished, precious, and in a certain sense most meaningful occupation in life, I usually appear as a married man. I have not sacrificed my life to art and science; compared with them, that to which I have sacrificed my life is but a trifle. I sacrifice myself to my work, my wife, my children, or, to be more accurate, I do not sacrifice myself to them, but find my joy and satisfaction in them.”<sup>379</sup> And because he has recognized the importance of choice, he criticizes a philosophy that is unable to do justice to it. To say that philosophy is unable to do justice to choice is to say also that it is unable to do justice to the future: “See, here again, I can put you together with the philosophers and say to all of you: You are missing out on the highest. My position as a married man makes me better able to explain what I mean. If a married man were to say that the perfect marriage is a childless marriage, he would be guilty of the same mistake that the philosophers make. He makes himself into the absolute, and yet any married man will consider that this is untrue and unbeautiful and that his becoming himself a moment, as he does by having a child, is much truer.”<sup>380</sup> With this observation the Judge returns us to the distinction between a contemplative and a procreative eros that occupies Plato in the *Symposium*.<sup>381</sup> “As truly then, as there is a time to come, so truly there is an

---

378 EO2, 170 / SKS 3, 166–167.

379 EO2, 170 / SKS 3, 166.

380 EO2, 172 / SKS 3, 168.

381 Note that Diotima at the end of her speech is not praising the life of someone lost in contemplation of true beauty, but someone, who puts this vision to work by giving birth to something beautiful. The gods may find satisfaction in pure contemplation. Our lot would appear to be a different one. We humans have to place *procreative eros*, albeit perhaps in a highly sublimated form, above *contempla-*

Either/Or. The time in which the philosopher lives is not absolute time; it is itself a moment. It is always a dubious circumstance when a philosopher is barren; indeed it must be considered a disgrace for him, just as in the Orient bareness is regarded as a dishonor."<sup>382</sup>

But let me return to the Judge and his decision to get married. There are of course many who get married without choosing in the Judge's sense. They sort of slip into marriage: one day they are married. Marrying just seemed the right thing to do. Not having to choose, they did not give up anything. Thus they continue to be open and vulnerable to the attractions of others. Marriage does not weigh on them. And yet, if it is a result of choice, marriage does and should weigh on us. The ethical man, too, is not blind to the charms of others. Indeed, just by excluding them, due to his choice, he is positing them, following Kierkegaard's, or rather A's dialectic. But he has bracketed them, has given them up.<sup>383</sup> And just this gives weight to the alternative he has chosen.

But note that given such stress on choice it seems important that there be what we can call an aesthetic education. What do I mean here by an aesthetic education? An education is one that, somewhat like A, invites us to play with possibilities. It is an education that liberates, that makes us open to all that life has to offer. So understood it is a liberal education, an education that liberates, casting doubt on much that is usually taken for granted. By opening up possibilities, by opening up alternatives, such an education renders life questionable. This is why a liberal education is needed, and not just an education that trains us for a certain profession. The immediate hold that family, country, society have on us first of all and most of the time, must be called into question if we are to genuinely commit ourselves to them, or to anything. Only the person who is at some distance from what he is committing himself to, is able to make such a commitment. It is thus important to detach oneself even and especially from those things that one takes to be most important, if one is to commit oneself to them in a meaningful

---

*tive eros*. We return to her earlier insistence that the object of love is not beauty but to give birth in beauty. Cf. *Symposium*, 212a.

382 EO2, 173 / SKS 3, 169.

383 In this way, B writes: "Marital love, however, has not only apriority in itself but also constancy in itself, and the energizing power in this constancy is the same as the law of motion – it is the commitment [*Forsættet*]. In the commitment [*Forsættet*], something else is posited, but this something else is also *posited as something surmounted*" (EO2, 98 / SKS 3, 100; translation modified and emphasis added).

manner. Criticism of, say, one's country, is often suspected, as if to criticize meant not to be committed. Quite the opposite holds: only someone who can criticize can make a genuine commitment, a commitment that has ethical significance. This I take to be one lesson of Plato's *Crito*. Socrates' commitment to Athens shows itself precisely in his willingness to criticize what he thinks needs to be criticized.

## 2

Either/or, the Judge argues, is characteristic of the ethical. But A, too, is rather fond of using that expression. Remember the ecstatic lecture in the "Diapsalmata," entitled "Either/Or": marry, you will regret it; don't marry you will also regret it; if you marry or do not marry, you will regret both; whether you marry or do not marry, you will regret both.<sup>384</sup> In that lecture occurs an interesting sentence, once again directed against Hegel: "The true eternity," A tells us, "does not lie behind either/or, but before it."<sup>385</sup> This opposes the eternity of freedom, which lies before either/or to the eternity of the reconciliation, in which it is *aufgehoben*, and in this sense lies behind it.

With the tradition, Hegel and the romantics had recognized that to be a finite conscious being implies having to choose. To consciously face the future is to know about the possibility of choice. And because of this we need criteria to choose by. Imagine yourself in a situation where you have to choose between alternatives A and B. Either you have a criterion for choosing or not. If you are in possession of such a criterion, we can ask whether this criterion is one you received in some sense, or whether it is your own invention. If the latter, was it invented for a good reason or not. But is there finally such a good reason?

Without criteria choice becomes arbitrary and resolute action indistinguishable from a spontaneous happening. But A despairs of finding such criteria, indeed does not want to find them. The aesthetic life, as A envisions it, is essentially a running away from the ethical. But to run away from something is to recognize its significance, although A does not see how it is possible to choose for an individual who does not accept criteria as the Judge does: can the Judge accept criteria as readily as he does only because he is more naive than A? This is a pos-

---

384 *EO1*, 38 / *SKS 2*, 47.

385 *EO1*, 39 / *SKS 2*, 48.

sibility we have to consider. Or are there criteria for all to see, who are seen by all, except by those who refuse to see them?

A, at any rate, finds the world a meaningless place and precisely because of this finds it impossible to choose. Why choose one thing rather than another? In the end it makes no difference. A is close to an existentialist such as Camus or Sartre. The human situation is absurd. Thus it is to be negated. The romantic seeks to escape from the absurdity that has its foundation in the finite by negating the finite. He makes a movement of infinite resignation, a movement away from the finite to that infinite he bears within himself. The everyday, and even more the ethical, its either/or, must be bracketed. Romantic irony is thus a liberation from the ethical.

Romanticism, too, like Hegelian philosophy, looks for this infinite behind either/or: once the veil of the finite has been torn, the infinite will be revealed. A is not quite a romantic. He no longer believes in a redeeming beyond in even this weak and rather foggy sense.

And how is the infinite of the romantics to be distinguished from nothingness? In this sense Kierkegaard is hostile to mysticism. This is as true of the aesthetic man, A, as it is of the Judge. Both poke fun at it. But if A does not believe in a saving transcendent infinite, he also cannot accept the finite and the necessity of choice that is part of the human situation. So he tries to escape not by going behind either/or, but by remaining before it. What does this mean? To remain before either/or is to play with possibilities. The only liberation from the finite takes place in the imagination.

Kierkegaard suggests that it is more important to confront either/or than it is to have an answer to the question: what is good. An *ethics of choice* appears to take the place of an *ethics of satisfaction*. Decisionism is not far away. But a few more words about these terms are in order. First: what do I mean by an ethics of satisfaction? To be satisfied is to be at one with oneself. But this is denied to us by our temporal condition. Plato thus assigns the soul its home in a timeless realm. While in time, the human being longs to return to this home. Where are we going? Novalis had asked: always home!<sup>386</sup> This is the romantic expression of the Platonic *eros*. Important here is this: given an ethics of satisfaction, to be at one with oneself is to be beyond time. To exist in time is to face oneself as still having to become. As long as the human being exists, he is incomplete. He is complete only when he

---

386 Novalis *Heinrich von Ofterdingen, Schriften*, vol. 1, p. 325.

is no longer. The idea of death and the ideal of satisfaction are thus closely joined. With good reason Plato’s Socrates thus considers philosophy the art of dying.<sup>387</sup> Death, to be sure, here does not mean with him an absolute death: what dies is our embodied, temporal being. True reality is placed by Plato beyond that realm.

A can no longer believe this. For him, the only way in which the human being can be is in time. And this means that the human being is inescapably incomplete, lacking true satisfaction. To see the human being as essentially incomplete is to privilege becoming over being. There is thus a sense in which Kierkegaard points the way towards Heidegger’s analysis of the temporality of “Dasein” in *Being and Time*.<sup>388</sup> A, however, finds it difficult to make peace with his temporality. He still tries to escape it, not by fleeing to some beyond – he does not believe in such a beyond – but by seeking the immediacy of enjoyment, where aesthetic enjoyment is privileged; that is so say, he tries to escape it by living his life as a work of art.

### 3

I asked whether the Judge’s ready acceptance of the ethical may not be more naive than the behavior of A. Can the Judge really provide A with a view of life that he can take seriously? Is it not just the Judge’s premise that life is meaningful that A is unable to accept? The Judge seems to recognize this, for in the end he does not appeal to A by giving him arguments, why he should abandon his wicked life. We might expect him to give A this advice: get married! But this is not what he does. The Judge admits his partiality: “I am a married man and thus I am partial, but it is my conviction that even though a woman corrupted man, she has honestly and honorably made up for it and is still doing so, for of a hundred men who go astray in the world, ninety-nine are saved by women, and one is saved by an immediate divine grace. And since I also think that it is the nature of a man to go astray in one way or in another and that it holds just as truly for the life of the man as it does for the life of the woman that she ought to remain in the pure and innocent peace of immediacy, you readily perceive that in my opinion

---

387 *Phædo*, 67d.

388 Martin Heidegger *Sein und Zeit*, pp. 235–267 / *Being and Time*, pp. 279–311.

woman makes full compensation for the harm she has done."<sup>389</sup> As Kierkegaard himself points out,<sup>390</sup> the Judge here allows himself to be carried away in that no man gets lost. And women apparently are not in need of saving. Or at least they should not be, not women as the Judge thinks they ought to be: innocent like children. Such women are very different from A's modern Antigone.

Note the either/or implicit in this statement: either you are saved by woman or you are saved by direct divine intervention. No choice is demanded by this either/or. It appears to state a fact. This then is not at all the ethical either/or mentioned before. It rather invites comparison with one of A's either/or's: either you bore others or you bore yourself. As to the ratio: I would make it much more extreme.

But what then is A to do? "What do you have to do, then? Someone else might say: Marry and then you will have something else to think about. Certainly, but it is still a question of whether it is beneficial to you, and however you think of the opposite sex, you are still too chivalrous of mind to want to marry for that reason. Furthermore, if you cannot control yourself, you will scarcely find anyone else who is able to do it. Or, some one might say: Seek a career, throw yourself into the world of business; it will take your mind off yourself, and you will forget your depression; work – that is the best thing to do. Perhaps you will succeed in bringing yourself to the point where it seems to have been forgotten. But forgotten it is not; it will still break out at certain moments, more terrible than ever; perhaps it will be able to do what it has not been able to do previously – take you by surprise. Moreover, whatever you may think of life and its task, you will still be too chivalrous of mind about yourself and to choose a career for that reason, for there is still the same falseness here as in marrying for that reason. What, then, is there to do? I have only one answer: Despair, then!"<sup>391</sup>

Just what is it that the Judge demands? He warns A against fighting despair by allowing himself to be distracted and both marriage and work can be such distractions. His demand, calling on A to despair, recalls what Heidegger has to say about the call of conscience which calls us back to ourselves, but only to open our eyes to the fact that the individual is unable to provide him- or herself with the focus needed to live a genuinely meaningful life, with that focal point that Kierkegaard himself

---

389 *EO2*, 207 / *SKS* 3, 199.

390 Cf. *EO2*, 382, as well as *EO1*, 11 / *SKS* 2, 18.

391 *EO2*, 207–208 / *SKS* 3, 199–200.

too despairingly sought.<sup>392</sup> But, the Judge counsels, A should not expect the world to present us with such a focal point. "If the despairing person errs and thinks that the trouble is somewhere in the multiplicity outside himself, then his despair is not authentic and it will lead him to hate the world and not love it, for however true it is that the world is an oppression to you because it seems to want to be something different for you than it can be, so it is also true that when in despair you have found yourself you will love it because it is what it is. If it is guilt and wrongdoing, an oppressed conscience, that brings a person to despair, he will perhaps have difficulty in regaining his happiness. Therefore despair with all your soul and all your mind; the longer you postpone it, the harder the condition will be, and the requirement remains the same. I shout it to you, just like the woman who offered to sell Tarquinius a collection of books, and when he would not pay the price she demanded, she burned a third of the books and asked the same price, and when he again refused to pay the price she demanded, she burned the second third of the collection and asked the same price, until finally he did pay the original price for the last third."<sup>393</sup> The Judge demands that A be honest with himself, that he admit what is present in his life and his writings: despair.

Despair is a disrelation within the self. To be in despair is to be what one is not, or not to be what one is.<sup>394</sup> The possibility of such a disrelation has its foundation in the fact that human beings are not as stones, plants, or animals are, but choose how and what they are to be, and can choose themselves in such a way that they do violence to what they are. This certainly is true of A. A dreams of a godlike self-sufficiency. His fundamental project is, as Sartre would say of all human beings, the project to be God. But this, as Sartre knows, is an impossible project.<sup>395</sup> A thus seeks to rely on his poetic imagination to give meaning to his life. He wants to be the author of that meaning. But just this he is unable to do. A senses this, but he does not really confront it. That is why the Judge shouts at him: Despair! "As far as I am concerned, it must in no way be denied that there are poets who have found themselves before they began to write or who found themselves through writing, but

---

392 *Sein und Zeit*, pp. 267–280 / *Being and Time*, pp. 312–325.

393 EO2, 208–209 / SKS 3, 200–201.

394 Kierkegaard analyses the concept of despair along these lines in *The Sickness unto Death*.

395 Jean-Paul Sartre *Being and Nothingness*, p. 615.

on the other hand it is also certain that the poet-existence as such lies in the darkness that is the result of a despair that was not carried through, the result of the soul's continuing to quake in despair and of the spirit's inability to achieve its true transfiguration. The poetic ideal is always an untrue ideal, for the true ideal, is always the actual. So when the spirit is not allowed to rise into the eternal world of the spirit, it remains in transit and delights in the pictures reflected in the clouds and weeps over their transitoriness.<sup>396</sup> Despair forms the background of A's poet-existence. This background he seeks to conceal or escape from. The ideal of the poetic life is false because it fails to do justice to what the human being is, i. e. a finite individual, tied to a particular situation, incapable in the end of endowing his life with meaning, dependent for meaning on the transcendent that constituted him – and we do not have to speak right away of God, but think only of the obvious fact that we are not the authors of our own being: Heidegger spoke in this connection of "Dasein's" essential guilt.<sup>397</sup> When the Judge counsels A to despair, he counsels him to confront the inescapable fact that what Sartre calls our fundamental project, our desire to be the authors of our own being, to be God, is a vain project. To will to despair is to choose oneself. And it is to choose oneself in such a way that one refuses to be diverted by the merely finite. The Judge thus warns that marriage or a job are no answer to despair. Despairing, the individual affirms his freedom, but despair opens such freedom to a reality that transcends him.

How is that transcendent reality to be thought? For many it is another human being who provides life with the needed focus. That is what lets the Judge say that of a hundred men who go astray, ninety-nine are saved by women. What prevents A, or for that matter Kierkegaard, from thus being saved? Is it only their pride, their inability to let go of the vain project to become like God, who is said to be *causa sui*? But if Sartre is right when he claims that this vain project is constitutive of human being, what alternative is there to despair? Freedom demands an absolute in which it can ground itself, a transcendence able to bind freedom. And those who have buried themselves within themselves will have to look there for what alone can save them. Despair thus readies the individual for faith.

---

396 EO2, 210 / SKS 3, 203.

397 *Sein und Zeit*, pp. 280–289 / *Being and Time*, pp. 325–335.

## 4

Kierkegaard is often read as if there were three stages, the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. These are supposed to constitute a sequence so that the individual passes from one to the next, from the aesthetic, via the ethical, to the religious. This is highly problematic: A can no longer pass from the aesthetic to the life of the Judge. He would seem to be that one man in a hundred who needs to be saved by God, rather than by woman. The first letter still suggests that A might be able to choose marriage. The married life here appears as an even aesthetically superior alternative to the life of seduction. But this is not an alternative A could choose. He is too deeply in despair to be redeemed by woman.

Implicit in this observation is another: Kierkegaard begins to see ever more clearly the strength of the romantic position as opposed to that of Hegel. In his dissertation Kierkegaard had thought that Hegel had said all that needed to be said against the romantic project.<sup>398</sup> In the second letter it becomes clear that Hegel, in Kierkegaard's opinion, had not even understood the romantic program, that there was a sense in which romanticism was actually ahead of Hegel – note once more the already quoted lines: "I am well aware that the position you take is anathema to philosophy, and yet it seems to me that it is itself guilty of the same error; indeed, the reason this is not immediately detected is that it is not even as properly situated as you are. You are situated in the area of action, philosophy in the area of contemplation."<sup>399</sup> About the philosophers of the age who think they have conquered doubt with their thoughts the Judge has this to say: "There is much truth in a person's saying 'I would like to believe, but I cannot – I must doubt.'"<sup>400</sup> This is a thought familiar to both Mother Theresa and the present pope, who wrote: "First of all, the believer is always threatened with the uncertainty which in moments of temptation can suddenly and unexpectedly cast a piercing light on the fragility of the whole that usually seems so self-evident to him."<sup>401</sup> But let me continue with the passage I have begun to quote: "Therefore, we often also see that a doubter can never-

---

398 Kierkegaard's indebtedness to Hegel in his critique of romanticism in *The Concept of Irony* has recently been discussed by Jon Stewart *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, pp. 170–181, as well as by K. Brian Söderquist *The Isolated Self*, pp. 139–172.

399 EO2, 170 / SKS 3, 166.

400 EO2, 212 / SKS 3, 203.

401 Joseph Ratzinger *Introduction to Christianity*, p. 17.

theless have in himself a positive substance that has no communication at all with his thinking, that he can be an extremely conscientious person who by no means doubts the validity of duty and the precepts for his conduct, by no means doubts a host of sympathetic feelings and moods. On the other hand, especially in our day, we see people who have despair in their hearts and yet have conquered doubt. This was especially striking to me when I looked at some of the German philosophers. Their minds are at ease; objective, logical thinking has been brought to rest in its corresponding objectivity, and yet, even though they divert themselves by objective thinking, they are in despair, for a person can divert himself in many ways, and there is scarcely any means as dulling and deadening as abstract thinking, for it is a matter of conducting oneself as impersonally as possible."<sup>402</sup> Hegel had failed to do justice to the problem of subjectivity. Precisely in that they placed subjectivity at the center of their reflections, in that they knew about the relationship between subjectivity, inwardness, and despair, the romantics did greater justice to the human situation than did Hegel. By assigning to human beings their place in his philosophical system, Hegel failed to do justice to the precariousness of our situation. The human being, when authentic, faces himself, faces others, faces God in fear and trembling. This the philosopher all too often covers up or forgets.

---

402 *EO2*, 212 / *SKS* 3, 203–204.

### 13. Ultimatum

#### 1

The aesthetic life, I suggested, can be considered a running away from freedom as the Judge understands it, freedom that faces, as he puts it, an either/or, that knows that it must choose. The aesthete considers such freedom a burden he would like to shed. Does choice not mean the elimination of possibilities and thus an abridgment of freedom?

Let me return briefly to the problem of choice: to choose responsibly, I suggested, requires criteria, openness to the truth that binds freedom. To invoke truth here is to suggest that these criteria must present themselves to us as possessing validity, validity that is not in turn something that can be freely chosen by us. I cannot choose what I take to be the truth. I thus cannot will some thing that I know to have little significance to be my highest value, no more than I can will that  $2+2=5$ . The arbitrariness of such a willing would rob it of its weight. The criteria or reasons that give weight to our choices must in some sense be given; they are not so much invented as discovered or recognized. The freedom the Judge is defending is thus inseparably bound up with his understanding of life as a vocation. A vocation is something to which we have been called. Who then is the caller? Society? Life? Conscience? The traditional answer, which is also that of the Judge, is God. God here is understood as calling human beings to their vocation. By getting married, by choosing to have children, by serving his society, the Judge answered that call.

It is no longer as fashionable today to deny the existence of God as it once was. It was only five decades ago that the then chairman and most distinguished representative of Yale's philosophy department, Brand Blanshard, could claim that a believing Christian could not be a good philosopher: must philosophy not insist on a freedom that religion would bind? Is it not reason alone that according to philosophy should bind freedom? And does reason not demand that death of God proclaimed by Nietzsche?

In the sixties attempts to show that religion was still possible in our godless technological or post-technological world generated much interest. Names frequently invoked in this connection included Rudolf

Bultmann, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Paul Tillich. That such concerns mattered not just to a few theologians is demonstrated by the widespread success then enjoyed by a book like bishop Robinson's *Honest to God*.<sup>403</sup> The then new God-is-dead-theology – names like Thomas Altizer<sup>404</sup> and Paul van Buren<sup>405</sup> figured prominently in the media – received broad coverage, even in journals such as *Time* magazine, which devoted a cover story to what seemed an exciting new movement.<sup>406</sup> Times have changed. The God-is-dead-theology no longer appears to interest the media. Have we today become more or even less religious?

Characteristic of this new religiosity was the attempt to subject God to reason – and one thing that reason finds especially difficult to accept is the divinity of Christ. To be sure, many were still willing to accept Christ as a model; but we post-Enlightenment moderns follow Christ, they thought, no longer because he is Christ, but because we recognize that what he considered important we too must consider important. “God is love” could thus be understood to mean “love is terribly important.” In a similar spirit Kant believed Christ's teaching to be in accord with his own categorical imperative. But he would consider any action immoral that was done, disregarding the demand of practical reason, just because God demanded it. Kant would have had little patience with Kierkegaard's “teleological suspension of the ethical.”<sup>407</sup> With Kant there is a sense in which the ethical is higher than the religious, the universal higher than the particular. And are we moderns not in this respect his heirs?

---

403 John A. T. Robinson *Honest to God*.

404 Thomas J. J. Altizer *Radical Theology and the Death of God; Gospel of Christian Atheism*.

405 Paul M. van Buren *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*.

406 *Time*, April, 1966.

407 In *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, Kant thus explicitly states with reference to Abraham: “Denn wenn Gott zum Menschen wirklich spräche, so kann dieser doch niemals *wissen*, daß es Gott sei, der zu ihm spricht. Es ist schlechterdings unmöglich, daß der Mensch durch seine Sinne den Unendlichen fassen, ihn von Sinnenwesen unterscheiden und ihn woran *kennen* solle. – Daß es aber *nicht* Gott sein könne, dessen Stimme er zu hören glaubt, davon kann er sich wohl in einigen Fällen überzeugen; denn wenn das was ihm durch sie geboten wird, dem moralischen Gesez zuwieder ist, so mag die Erscheinung ihm noch so majestätisch und die ganze Natur überschreitend dünken: er muß sie doch für Täuschung halten.” (Immanuel Kant *Der Streit der Fakultäten, Werke*, vol. 7, p. 63.)

A Kantian has to find aspects of Kierkegaard's understanding of faith hard to take. That goes especially for Kierkegaard's interpretation of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, on which I have touched a number of times. Abraham, Kierkegaard tells us, was tempted by God, endured temptation, and received back a son, contrary to expectation. God tempted Abraham by demanding of him that he sacrifice his son, demanded obedience although such obedience is irreconcilable with the demands of practical reason. To act as Abraham did the ethical had to be suspended.

But perhaps we should speak of a twofold temptation: did the ethical not also tempt Abraham by suggesting that for its sake he must forsake God? God or the ethical! Either/Or! From the ethical point of view Abraham's decision to sacrifice Isaac is a decision to commit murder, to murder his own son. There are no two ways about it. Quite some years ago there was a woman in Canada who killed her son, "reasoning" – hardly the right word here – much like Abraham. She believed to have been called by God. And she was obedient, just like Abraham. Is it important in this connection that God returned Abraham to Isaac? What matters first of all here is an obedience that suspends the ethical. Such an action cannot be justified, as Kierkegaard emphasizes. If Abraham were to visit us today there is nothing he could say or do to make his action comprehensible to us. He might attempt to speak of a call he received, a call so imperious that it silenced, or better suspended, all other calls. Perhaps some of us could follow him some distance, and perhaps not so much those of us who consider themselves religious, as those who had been or still are in love, for love can involve a claim that silences all other claims. In that sense love, too, involves a teleological suspension of the ethical, elevates the particular above the universal.

But suppose the person we loved demanded of us that we commit murder. And suppose we then committed the murder and when asked to justify ourselves we answered, because my love bade me do it? Would we not consider such a person in some sense insane? No human being should allow another such power. In that sense our commitment to another should never be absolute, should stand in a framework that includes our ethical convictions.

And should we not argue similarly with respect to what we may experience as the call of God? How otherwise are we to distinguish a call that comes from God from a call that comes from the devil, who often mimics God? We demand explanation, justification.

And yet Kierkegaard is right: a call or claim is first of all experienced. It cannot be justified. It would be foolish to try to justify love. To justify, as Kierkegaard points out, is to place the universal higher than the particular. Someone who experiences the imperious reality of such a call, be it the call of someone he or she loves or be it the call of God, is tempted or perhaps even forced by the strength of that call to place the particular higher than the universal. But should we not resist such force?

## 2

Kierkegaard's telling of the Abraham story bifurcates faith and reason. Since Luther, who called reason a whore,<sup>408</sup> there has been a tendency in this direction, especially in Protestant thought. Catholicism, on the other hand, has traditionally been more insistent on the mediation of individual faith by the Church, by an institution. Two different conceptions of faith here confront each other. To someone who has the faith of Kierkegaard's Abraham, the demand for justification must seem a threat to the inwardness of genuine faith, a subjection of God to human reason. Someone who insisted that faith be mediated, that faith too must be justified, would no longer believe in that sense.

In volume two of *Either/Or* this understanding of faith makes an appearance in the final section, which bears the title "Ultimatum" ["A Final Word"]. Except for a brief introduction, in which the Judge disclaims authorship, it is given over to a sermon he says he received from a friend from his student days, now a pastor of a small remote parish in Jutland, a man who calls the storm-swept heath his study, a place where he is alone with God, his ideal listener; and even when this pastor steps into the pulpit, addressing his parishioners, it is still, he tells his old friend the Judge, as if he were on that heath, alone with God, shouting what he feels needs to be said into the storm, even though he is confident that everyone of the peasants listening will understand the sermon he now is sending his friend, a sermon that seeks to explain "The Upbuilding that Lies in the Thought that in Relation to God We are Always in the Wrong." The Judge, who is now forwarding this sermon to his younger friend A, claims that what it has to say is indeed accessible to all: is it not "the beauty of the universal that all are able to understand

---

408 Cf. Martin Luther *Werke*, vol. 51, p. 126.

it”?<sup>409</sup> But what right has the Judge to invoke here the category of beauty? Has he really understood it? Will A understand it? And what about us readers of *Either/Or*?

Reading the sermon, the reader is much more likely to accept the Judge’s disclaimer of authorship than he is to accept A’s disclaimer to be the author of “The Seducer’s Diary.” An abyss would seem to separate the introverted faith of the “Ultimatum” from the self-satisfied faith of the Judge. That abyss is hinted at already by their different environments: the pastor standing alone on his storm-swept heath, an image that invites the category of the sublime, the Judge well sheltered, at home with his family, an image that invites the category of the beautiful. The Judge is to the pastor, as the beautiful is to the sublime, where we should keep in mind that the experience of the beautiful has traditionally been tied to a sense of feeling at home in the world, while the experience of the sublime has been tied to an experience of homelessness.

### 3

How are we to understand “THE UPBUILDING THAT LIES IN THE THOUGHT THAT IN RELATION TO GOD WE ARE ALWAYS IN THE WRONG”?<sup>410</sup> Why should the thought that in relation to God we are always in the wrong be upbuilding or edifying (I prefer the latter translation)? And what does it mean to say that in relation to God we are always in the wrong? Does such a statement even make sense?

There is a rather trivial way in which being in the wrong and recognizing this can be edifying. “We think the wise and better way to act is to admit that we are in the wrong if we actually are in the wrong; we then say that the pain that accompanies the admission will be like a bitter medicine that will heal, but we do not conceal that it is a pain to be in the wrong, a pain to admit it. We suffer the pain because we know that it is to our good; we trust that sometime we shall succeed in making a more energetic resistance and may reach the point of really being in the wrong only in very rare instances. This point of view is very natural and

---

409 EO2, 338 / SKS 2, 318.

410 EO2, 346 / SKS 3, 326.

obvious to everyone.”<sup>411</sup> And so it is. We learn not to make the same mistakes again and thus improve ourselves.

Here we speak of being in the wrong in a way that presupposes that we not only can be, but often are and should strive to be in the right. But being in the right and being in the wrong are not thought here in relation to God, but in familiar everyday terms. So understood, we generally feel good when we know that we are indeed in the right. It is part of feeling at home in our world. “But if that first point of view, which provided hope that in time one would never be in the wrong, is upbuilding, how then can the opposite point of view also be upbuilding – that view that wants to teach us that we always, in the future as well as in the past, are in the wrong?”<sup>412</sup> The first part of the statement is easy to understand: It edifies us to think that we are doing what duty demands. Our good conscience brings with it a joy and peace that is not disturbed by the nastiness of the world. “Ein gutes Gewissen,” a good conscience, is thus said to be “ein sanftes Ruheknissen,” a soft pillow on which to rest. “In this view there is a satisfaction, a joy, that presumably every one of us has tasted, and when you continue to suffer wrong, you are built up by the thought that you are in the right. This view is so natural, so understandable, so frequently tested in life, and yet it is not with this that we want to calm doubt and to heal care, but by deliberating upon the upbuilding that lies in the thought that we are always in the wrong. Can the opposite point of view, then have the same effect?”<sup>413</sup> If the first part of the statement is easy to understand, we stumble over the second. To say that it is edifying to know “that we always, in the future as well as in the past, are in the wrong” is to assert that “being in the wrong” is not to be understood as the result of some particular mistake. But what could this mean: the human being is always in the wrong – is in the wrong just because he or she is a human being? This would seem to make “being-in-the-wrong” into an *existential* rather like Heidegger’s “guilt,” i. e. into a structure constitutive of human being, something we cannot shed, without shedding our humanity. But does this make sense?

No doubt, to be sure, that one is right often calms doubt and heals care. It thus seems only natural that human beings should want to be in the right. Did not Aristotle teach that all men by nature desire to

---

411 EO2, 346–347 / SKS 3, 326.

412 EO2, 347 / SKS 3, 326.

413 EO2, 347 / SKS 3, 326–327.

know?<sup>414</sup> To want to be in the right is an expression of that desire. To want to be right is to look to reason to bind our freedom. Thus bound our restless mind finds rest.

To be in the right about something is to understand it. To understand something is to be in some sense on top of the matter under discussion, to be its master. To really understand nature is to be, in Descartes' sense the master and possessor of nature;<sup>415</sup> to really understand oneself is to be master and possessor of oneself. But we human beings, Kierkegaard's parson insists, are in principle not the masters of reality: not of nature, not of ourselves. Just the opposite: we are always in the wrong. But again: how can recognition of that be edifying?

Imagine yourself arguing with someone. In such cases your desire to be in the right is a desire to be on top. You want to win the argument, want to prove your superiority. The desire to be in the right is here born of pride. In such cases the desire to be right is understandable, all too human perhaps, but not at all edifying.

Suppose now your argument is with someone you really love. Would you still want to be right? Would this not make out of love a contest, a fencing match, somewhat in the way in which the Seducer sees his relationship with Cordelia at times as just such a fencing match. But genuine love cannot desire a victory that would render the relationship of the lovers asymmetrical: the vanquished subject to the victor, as the master is to the slave.

And suppose now you had good reason to suspect that the person you loved had been unfaithful? "You would wish that you might be in the wrong; you would try to find something that could speak in his defense, and if you did not find it, you would find rest only in the thought that you were in the wrong. Or if you were assigned the responsibility for such a person's welfare, you would do everything in your power, and when the other person nevertheless paid no attention to it and only caused you trouble, is it not true that you would make an accounting and say: I know I have done right by him? – Oh, no! If you loved him, this thought would only alarm you; you would reach for every probability, and if you found none, you would tear up the accounting in order to help you forget it, and you would build yourself up with the thought that you were in the wrong."<sup>416</sup> Suppose we

---

414 *Metaphysica*, I.980a

415 René Descartes *Discourse on Method, Philosophical Works*, vol. 1, p. 119.

416 EO2, 348 / SKS 3, 327.

thought that we had been seriously wronged by the person we love. Would we not, as Kierkegaard points out, cling to the thought that we were mistaken; e. g. would Marie Beaumarchais not be glad to discover that Clavigo had not really wronged her, glad to discover some fact that would cast a different light on everything and show that she had been in the wrong? “How can this be explained except by saying that in the one case you loved, in the other you did not – in other words, in the one case you were in an infinite relationship with a person, in the other case in a finite relationship? Therefore, wishing to be in the wrong is an expression of an infinite relationship, and wanting to be right, or finding it painful to be in the wrong, is an expression of a finite relationship! Hence it is upbuilding always to be in the wrong – because only the infinite relationship builds up; the finite does not!”<sup>417</sup> What does this mean: “the infinite relationship builds up; the finite does not”? I shall have to return to that question.

## 4

But first let us take a closer look at the analogy invoked here – and not only here – between love of an individual and love of God. “Now, if it were a person you loved, even if your love managed piously to deceive your thinking and yourself, you would still be in a continual contradiction, because you would know you were right but you wished and wished to believe that you were in the wrong. If, however, it was God you loved, could there be any question of such a contradiction, could you then be conscious of anything else than what you wished to believe? Would not he who is in heaven be greater than you who live on earth; would not his wealth be more superabundant than your measure, his wisdom more profound than your cleverness, his holiness greater than your righteousness? Must you not of necessity acknowledge this – but if you must acknowledge this – there is no contradiction between your knowledge and your wish.”<sup>418</sup> To know that one in the right is to think oneself in possession of some truth. This in turn presupposes a confidence that our finite understanding and the reality we are trying to understand are commensurable. To know that one is right is to stand in a finite relationship to whatever one is right about. To claim

---

417 *Ibid.*

418 *EO2*, 348–349 / *SKS 3*, 327–328.

that in relation to God we are always in the wrong is to deny such commensurability, is to claim that there is a sense in which everything real understood in relation to God transcends the reach of our finite understanding, that so understood our assertions are never true. This is to suggest that those who, like Spinoza, would subject reality to the principle of sufficient reason shut out faith. To know is to have mastered the known. To know something is to have subjected it to my finite reason and to its measures. In this sense the knowing subject transcends whatever it knows.

By affirming that I am always in the wrong, I affirm that while as knowing subject I may transcend whatever I really know, I am incapable of subjecting God's will and his creation to my reason. The Greeks, Kierkegaard is more specific and mentions the Pythagoreans,<sup>419</sup> may have thought the finite higher than the infinite, which presented itself to them only as the measureless *apeiron*; the Christian has to reverse priorities and insist that the infinite is higher, indeed infinitely higher, than the finite, that God and all creation transcend human reason. The pastor's sermon implies thus the incompatibility of Christianity with Hegel's Absolute, which seeks to bridge the abyss that separates the divine infinite and human reason. The abyss will not be bridged and any attempt to do so will replace the divine with its simulacrum.

## 5

But can we really make sense of the claim that "we are always in the wrong"? The sermon after all recognizes that in our everyday dealings with persons and things we are often in the right. This presupposes that there is indeed a sense in which we finite knowers can lay claim to truth, as presupposed by our common sense. But common sense does not think "truth" "in relation to God." What would it mean to do so? To answer that question we must first gain a better understanding of the meaning of truth. What, then, is truth?

Most people, although perhaps no longer most philosophers, would seem to be quite untroubled by this old Pilate question, quite ready to say with Kant that the meaning of truth is correspondence and that this is so obvious that it can be "geschenkt, und vorausgesetzt,"<sup>420</sup> granted

---

419 Cf. *EO2*, 387.

420 Immanuel Kant *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 58 / B 82.

and presupposed without need for much discussion. The essence of truth is here thought to lie in the agreement of the judgment with its object. In his everyday dealings with persons and things Kierkegaard's parson would no doubt have agreed.

To be sure, as Kant recognized, we use truth in different senses. He thus distinguished such "material (objective) truth" from a merely formal or logical truth, where knowledge agrees with itself, abstracting from all content, and from merely aesthetic or subjective truth, where our understanding agrees with the subject and what appears to it. Error results when we mistake what is merely subjective for what is objective, mistake appearance for truth.<sup>421</sup> But what we most often mean by truth is material, objective truth. That we are capable of the truth in this sense neither Kierkegaard's parson, nor Kierkegaard himself would deny. When he claims that we are always in the wrong, is the parson then asserting that even when right in this sense, we are yet in the wrong in another, more profound sense?

The question brings to mind Kierkegaard's claim in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that "Truth is subjectivity." Truth is understood here as "*An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness*" – Kierkegaard was thinking once again of both love and faith. This he calls "the highest truth there is for an existing person."<sup>422</sup> In such attainment the individual is said to perfect him- or herself. And did not Kant understand "truth" as "the essential and inseparable condition of all perfection of knowledge"?<sup>423</sup> Kant, to be sure, would have questioned whether such subjective truth deserves to be called a perfection of knowledge. And as the expression "objective uncertainty" suggests, Kierkegaard, knew very well that first of all "the question about truth is asked objectively, truth is reflected upon objectively as an object to which the knower relates himself."<sup>424</sup> But his distinction between subjective and objective truth helps to bring into focus what is at issue: the value of truth, an issue that was to preoccupy Nietzsche. As Kierkegaard put it: "The way of objective reflection turns the subjective individual into something accidental and thereby turns existence into an indifferent, vanishing something. The way to the objective truth goes away from the subject, and while the subject

---

421 Kant *Logik, Werke*, vol. 9, A 69–A 83.

422 *CUP*, 203 / *SKS* 7, 186.

423 Kant *Logik, Werke*, vol. 9, A 69.

424 *CUP*, 199 / *SKS* 7, 182.

and subjectivity become indifferent [*ligegyldig*], the truth also becomes indifferent, and that is precisely its objective validity [*Gyldighed*], because the interest, just like the decision, is subjectivity.”<sup>425</sup> That the other side of the pursuit of objective truth is nihilism was recognized by Nietzsche, and reiterated by both Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus* and by Martin Heidegger.

How then can religion make its peace with the commitment to objectivity and a truth that threatens to transform the world into the totality of essentially indifferent facts? But conversely, how can we moderns, committed to science as we are, make our peace with such a privileging of subjectivity that calls into question reason’s claim to truth? How can we accept the parson’s claim that we are always in the wrong? Must we not dismiss it, at least in this strong form, as senseless, just as we must dismiss Nietzsche’s related claim, that truth is a lie?

This returns us to the question: what is truth? Consider once more the familiar understanding of truth as correspondence. In keeping with that understanding, Thomas Aquinas defined truth as “the adequation of the thing and the understanding”: *Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*.<sup>426</sup> The definition claims that there can be no truth where there is no understanding.

This raises the question whether there be understanding without human beings? If not, this would imply that there can be no eternal truths, unless human beings will be forever. But must we not dismiss that implication? When I claim some assertion to be true, I claim it, not just subjectively, here and now, but for all time, provided that I have taken into account all the relevant relativities. “Today the sun is

---

425 CUP, 193 / SKS 7, 177.

426 Thomas Aquinas *Questiones disputatae de veritate*, qu. 1, art. 1. It is interesting to note that in his detailed reconstruction of Kierkegaard’s possible knowledge of Thomas, Bøgeskov concludes that Kierkegaard associates him with a kind of Hegelian rationalism: “Of all the different sources that serve to form Kierkegaard’s view of Aquinas, the most influential one must have been Martensen’s exposition, in which Aquinas is presented as a kind of Hegelian, who gives a predominant role to reason above faith and for whom incarnation is a metaphysical necessity. This image must have been reinforced by Aquinas’ method, and the fact that he wrote the *Summa*, which in Kierkegaard’s eyes must have seemed quite similar to the Hegelian system. Also Aquinas’ acceptance of a rational proof of God’s existence undermined the priority of faith and must have looked like the pretensions of the objective thinker” (Benjamin Olivares Bøgeskov “Thomas Aquinas: Kierkegaard’s View Based on Scattered and Uncertain Sources,” p. 202).

shining” may not be true tomorrow or in some other place; but that does not mean that the state of affairs expressed in the assertion is not true *sub specie aeternitatis* and can be restated in language that removes the relativities. But does the definition of truth as the adequation of the thing and the understanding allow for such an understanding of truth? Is human life here on earth more than an insignificant cosmic episode? Consider the fable with which Nietzsche, borrowing from Schopenhauer, begins “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense.” Nietzsche here calls attention to the disproportion between the human claim to truth and our peripheral location in the cosmos and the ephemeral nature of our being. Must the time not come, when there will no longer be human beings, when there will be no understanding, and hence no truth?

Thomas Aquinas, to be sure, like any believer in the Biblical God, would have had no difficulty answering Nietzsche. His understanding of God left no room for thoughts of a cosmos from which understanding would be absent. His was a theocentric understanding of truth, where we should note that the definition *veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus* invites two readings: *veritas est adaequatio intellectus ad rem*, “truth is the adequation of the understanding to the thing” and *veritas est adaequatio rei ad intellectum*, “truth is the adequation of the thing to the understanding.” And is the second not presupposed by the first? Is there not a sense in which the truth of our assertions presupposes the truth of things? If we are to measure the truth of an assertion by the thing asserted, that thing must disclose itself as it really is, as it is in truth. But what could “truth” now mean? Certainly not an adequation of the thing to our finite, perspective-bound understanding: that would substitute appearances for the things themselves.

Theology once had a ready answer: every created thing necessarily corresponds to the idea preconceived in the mind of God and in this sense cannot but be true. The truth of things, understood as *adaequatio rei (creandae) ad intellectum (divinum)* measures and thus secures truth understood as *adaequatio intellectus (humani) ad rem (creatam)*.<sup>427</sup>

But what right do we have to think that we can bridge the abyss that separates God’s infinite creative knowledge from our finite human understanding? Thomas Aquinas would have insisted God created us in his image and that our finite reason is sufficiently godlike for us to be capable of many truths. But the greater the emphasis on the infinity of God,

---

427 See Martin Heidegger “Vom Wesen der Wahrheit,” *Wegmarken*, pp. 178–182.

the less able the human knower will be to appeal to God to ground his claims to knowledge. And when God has withdrawn from the world, has become an absent God or is declared to have died, we are left with only a human truth that no longer can claim to do justice to reality. Still relying on the traditional understanding of truth as correspondence, Nietzsche thus was to insist in "On Truth and Lie," that if we were to seize *the* truth, our designations would have to be congruent with things. Pure truth, according to Nietzsche, thus would be nothing other than the thing itself.<sup>428</sup> This recalls the traditional view that gives human discourse its measure in divine discourse. God's creative word is nothing other than the truth of things. As Nietzsche recognized, in this strong sense, truth is denied to us finite knowers. The parson's "we are always in the wrong" invites thus comparison with Nietzsche's claim that what we call truth is in fact a lie.

Kant could have agreed with this claim: if we understand truth as the correspondence of our judgments and things in themselves, understood by him as noumena, another term that names the truth of things, then there is no truth available to human beings for him either. But Kant does not conclude, as Nietzsche does, that therefore we cannot give a transcendental justification of the human pursuit of truth. As Kierkegaard recognized, we need not think truth in relation to God, but can think it in relation to an ideal human knower. To be sure, our theorizing cannot penetrate beyond phenomena; things as they are in themselves are beyond the reach of what we can objectively know. But no more than Kierkegaard does Kant claim that the truth pursued by science is therefore itself no more than a subjective illusion. The truth of phenomena, objective truth, provides sufficient ground for science and its pursuit of truth. There is no need to think that truth "in relation to God." Key to our understanding of this human truth is this thought: to understand that what we experience is only an appearance, bound by a particular perspective, is to be already on the road towards a more adequate, and that means here first of all less perspective-bound and in this sense freer understanding. The pursuit of truth demands a movement of self-transcendence that, by leading us to understand subjective appearance for what it is, opens a path towards a more adequate, more objective understanding. The pursuit of truth demands objectivity. But, to repeat, truth here is not thought in relation to God. When we attempt to do so we discover ourselves to be in the wrong.

---

428 Nietzsche "Über Wahrheit und Lüge," *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 1, p. 879.

And that this is not just a harmless straying from some supposedly higher truth that does not really matter to us finite knowers, becomes clear when we begin to understand that, as Kierkegaard recognized, and as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger – to name just three significant thinkers – were to recognize later, the pursuit of objective truth must breed indifference. Kierkegaard has thus good reason to have his Jutland pastor insist on placing truth in relation to God, quite aware that by doing so he turns his back on the human truth that presides over science and our modern world.

## 6

But suppose we recognize that the pursuit of objective truth has to lose God, recognize the need to place truth in relation to God, still, what sense can we make of saying that “in relation to God we are always in the wrong.” And if we were indeed able to make sense of this thought, would it not cease to edify? Would it not rather undermine all our efforts to be in the right, to do the right thing, would it not undermine not only ethics, but everything that might lead us to feel that what we choose to do matters?

To hold on to what makes the thought edifying, we have to recognize that it is edifying only when supported, not by reason, but by love. “Why did you wish to be in the wrong in relation to a person? Because you loved. The more you love, the less time you had to deliberate upon whether or not you were in the right; your love had only one desire, that you might continually be in the wrong. So also in your relationship with God. You loved God, and therefore your soul could find rest and joy only in this, that you might always be in the wrong. You did not arrive at this acknowledgement out of mental toil; you were not forced, for when you are in love you are in freedom.”<sup>429</sup>

Kierkegaard here thinks the person who has faith in the image of a wronged female lover. And is someone who would love God not in a comparable position. Too much happens in the world that makes it seem almost obscene to invoke a lovable, benevolent, all-powerful Deity who guides everything to the best and watches over us. Just consider the countless, major and minor, natural and man-made disasters. Consider the beginning of the sermon, an exegesis of the nineteenth

---

429 *EO2*, 349 / *SKS* 3, 328.

chapter of Luke: “The event the Spirit had revealed in visions and dreams to the prophets, what they had proclaimed in a foreboding voice to one generation after the other – the repudiation of the Chosen People, the dreadful destruction of proud Jerusalem – was coming closer and closer. Christ goes up to Jerusalem. He is no prophet who prophesies the future; what he says does not arouse anxious unrest, for what is still hidden he sees before his eyes. He does not prophesy – there is no more time for that – he weeps over Jerusalem. And yet the city still stood in all its glory, and the temple still carried its head high as always, higher than any other building in the world, and Christ himself says: Would that even today you knew what was best for your good, but also adds: Yet it is hidden from your eyes. In God’s eternal counsel, its downfall is decided, and salvation is hidden from its inhabitants.”<sup>430</sup>

Can God’s wrath be justified? “For the offense this nation had committed, this generation had to pay the penalty; for the offense this generation had committed, each member of the generation had to pay the penalty. Must the righteous, then, suffer with the unrighteous? Is this the zealotry of God – to visit the sins of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation, so that he does not punish the fathers, but the children? What should we answer? Should we say: It will soon be two thousand years since those days; a nightmare such as that the world never saw before and will probably never see again; we thank God that we live in peace and security, that the shriek of anxiety from those days sounds very faint to us. We will hope and trust that our days and our children’s days may proceed in tranquility, untouched by the storms of life! We do not feel strong enough to think about such things, but will thank God that we are not tested by them.”<sup>431</sup>

We were of course to be tested all too soon. How can one still believe in God after two world wars and the holocaust, to which we can add the horrors of the present? Isn’t Ivan Karamazov right? Isn’t the suffering of a single innocent child sufficient to make us doubt the existence of God?<sup>432</sup> How can we still thank God after Auschwitz? “Does it explain the unexplainable to say that it has happened only once in the world? Or is this not the unexplainable – that it has happened? And does not this, that it has happened, have the power to

---

430 EO2, 342 / SKS 3, 322.

431 EO2, 342–343 / SKS 3, 322–323.

432 Cf. Fyodor Dostoevsky *The Brothers Karamazov*, pp. 236–246.

make everything else unexplainable, even the explainable?”<sup>433</sup> This could have been said by a nihilist. He too has given up demanding answers to his demand for meaning, but only because he no longer believes in some higher sense. For him there is no God he loves. There is only a world indifferent to human suffering. That is why he cannot consider himself to be always in the wrong. The only right that matters to him is a right that has its foundation in a distinctly human freedom and reason.

To believe oneself always in the wrong is to hold on to a notion of right, even though Kierkegaard's parson accepts that this right is incomprehensible. For the nihilist there cannot be the edification promised by the title of Kierkegaard's sermon. We could put it this way: Like Nietzsche, the nihilist, too, knows that he is not the measure of all things, that he cannot finally bend reality to his reason. He, too, recognizes something like transcendence, but transcendence presents itself to him as a mute opacity. But he would not want to call this mute transcendence God. Fate, accident, perhaps will, as Schopenhauer called it, might be better names and what these names name he cannot love. He does not experience himself as being in the wrong. If anything, the world is in the wrong. But that is not right either. It simply is indifferent to human beings and their demands. The aesthete attempts to assert himself in the face of such indifference by relying on his own creativity to wrest from reality beautiful fictions and to use these to transfigure reality.

In the face of reality, how can the parson hold on to his love of God? What or whom is he loving? How are we to think his God?

## 7

The preceding suggests why I should find it unsatisfactory to follow those who, taking their cue from Paul Tillich, think of God as the ground of our being, as once was fashionable. This does have the advantage of defining God in such a way that no one in his right mind could deny God's existence, for to do so he would have to argue that we are our own foundation, that of our own free will he chose to come into the world and will choose to leave it. If we are willing to settle for some such definition of God we can indeed say, God exists. But

---

<sup>433</sup> EO2, 343 / SKS 3, 323.

for such a “God” I would prefer other names: nature, fate, or accident for example. Why should I love such a God?

Similar considerations also make me uneasy about a book like Rudolf Otto’s *Idea of the Holy*.<sup>434</sup> Otto seeks the core of the religious experience in an awareness of the holy, which in turn is said to be grounded in an experience of the numinous, defined as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. But the awareness of such a *mysterium* is constitutive of our being in so far as we have not created ourselves. The ground of our being remains incomprehensible. Our finite existence is transcended by a reality that cannot be mastered conceptually. We can express this in the language of traditional philosophy by calling this transcendence infinite in that it transcends our finite understanding. This *mysterium* is *tremendum* because it threatens and sooner or later will bring our destruction, awakening dread. Our finite being will be surpassed by what we cannot comprehend. But it is also *fascinans*, for finite existence is itself a burden, as philosophers from Plato to Heidegger have recognized. To exist in time is inevitably to be dissatisfied, to dream of satisfaction, of a happiness not marred by lack. These all too human dreams are readily projected unto the infinite. But all of this can of course be granted also by the nihilist. If this is taken to capture the core of religious experience, religion is grasped in such general terms that it includes everyone. So understood it is impossible not to be religious, no matter what some individual may claim.

This is not to deny that God has traditionally been understood as such a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* or as the ground of being. But much more is demanded, if we are to make sense of the God towards whom Kierkegaard’s parson directs his love.

## 8

Kierkegaard’s Jutland preacher has something quite different in mind. God is understood by him not just as such a mysterious transcendence, but also as a person before whom we can be, indeed inevitably are always in the wrong. “If your wish were what others and you yourself in a certain sense must call your duty, if you not only had to deny your wish but in a way betray your duty, if you lost not only your joy but even your honor, you are still happy – in relation to God

---

<sup>434</sup> Rudolf Otto *The Idea of the Holy*.

you say: I am always in the wrong. If you knocked but it was not opened, if you searched but did not find, if you worked but received nothing, if you planted and watered but saw no blessing, if heaven was shut and the testimony failed to come, you are still happy in your work; if the punishment that the iniquity of the fathers had called down came upon you, you are still happy – because in relation to God we are always in the wrong.”<sup>435</sup> Why would we, knowing that in relation to God we will be always in the wrong still be happy and happy in a way no evidence, no fact could undermine. To think ourselves always in the wrong we have to presuppose that there is indeed a right, but one out of all proportion with our human rights. To love God in this way is not to ask him to justify his ways to us. The faith of Kierkegaard’s parson is thus incompatible with any attempt at a theodicy.<sup>436</sup> All such attempts subject what is infinite and transcends our understanding to that understanding, calling it before the court of our human reason. But God will give no answer in such a court. There will be no answers to our charges. Our accusations will only meet with silence. But why then not accept this silence, as a nihilist would do, why claim to be always in the wrong in relation to God, which presupposes that we think God as always in the right. To do so is to think Him as being a person, as we are persons, is to believe that an infinite, transcendent logos answers to our human logos. And I would go along with Kierkegaard’s parson and suggest that we should not speak of God when all we mean by this is the numinous ground of our being. God is understood in the “Ultimatum” as the infinite object of our love, a love that like earthly love, having found its object has the power to gather our life into a meaningful whole. In this sense it provides life with that focus the young Kierkegaard had sought. The philosopher cannot say that this God either exists or does not exist. He cannot specify the meaning. This God resides outside the space of philosophical reasoning. Just as philosophy, philosophy cannot know anything of this God. An answer can only be given by that infinite love that is faith and lets us affirm our life unconditionally.

---

435 *EO2*, 353 / *SKS* 3, 331–332.

436 In this regard, cf. also David J. Kangas “The Very Opposite of Beginning with Nothing: Guilt Consciousness in Kierkegaard’s ‘The Gospel of Suffering’ IV.”

## 9

But does this infinite God do justice to the traditional understanding of God? God is not only the ground of beings, including the being of man; he is not only the God who calls human beings as he called Abraham in a way that demands a teleological suspension of reason and of the ethical; he is also the author of the law. This law, we may say, is the mediation of a divine call, or the descent of the infinite into the finite.

Perhaps we should distinguish here two kinds of call, direct and indirect. God understood as the author of the law is a public God. The law may have been given to some individual, but it belongs to the community to which his law is addressed. It has to recognize in the prophet's law its law and preserve it as such. This law then is in its very essence something communal and depending on how we understand the scope of the community addressed, something universal. By revealing to man His laws, God provides human beings with measures, which they can then use to measure themselves and their actions. The God of the Old Testament is thus both, the creator of the cosmos and the author of the law. And to those who believe, the authority of the law does not rest on human reason, but on the inexplicable descent of the infinite logos into the finite, rests on the incarnation of the divine Word in the tablets Moses brought down from Mount Sinai and on the divine spirit dwelling in those to whom the law was addressed. Severed from faith, pure practical reason has no convincing answer to the question: why should I be moral? – as Kant suspected with his doctrine of radical evil. There is no argument that can make an evil person embrace the good, no good argument, e. g., that will force someone who finds the claim that we should strive to maximize pleasure and minimize pain in our own case quite persuasive, but sees no good reason to extend that principle to all human beings or perhaps even further, to change his mind. That would require a change of heart. Ethics presupposes faith in some power that calls us to that respect of others and their rights that found expression in Kant's categorical imperative. In that sense when we dig into the foundations of ethics we will inevitably hit sooner or later on religious ground.

But, as Kierkegaard's telling of the Abraham story shows, the God who demands of Abraham that he sacrifice his son, may demand something of us that clashes with the God who gave His law to the community to which we belong. Gnosticism could be said to differ from orthodox Christianity in separating the God who calls the solitary self from

the God who gave the law, where the God of the law comes to be interpreted as an evil God who fetters our infinite freedom and does violence to the infinite in man, while the infinite God who calls the individual back to his true infinite self. The medieval heresy of the Free Spirit advanced such arguments.<sup>437</sup>

The Church's resistance to such heresies, like the Church fathers' defense of Christianity against Gnosticism, may be understood as born of an insistence on the unity of these three aspects of God. I would agree and argue that someone who cannot hold on to all three aspects has lost something essential, raising the question of the proximity of Kierkegaard to such Gnostic tendencies?

I have pointed out that it is impossible to deny that we are not the authors of our being. We have not chosen to come into the world, have not chosen to be the kind of persons we happen to be, have not chosen to have to die. In that sense we cannot help but confront what we may want to call the ground of our being as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. And if we were to take some such description as an adequate description of God, no one could deny the existence of God. But more must be demanded of a description that can be considered at all adequate.

I have also suggested that responsible choice requires criteria that are discovered, not freely created. In some sense such criteria must have been given. We may want to call the giver God, thinking of Moses and his law. But once again there would seem to be no need not do so. We may for example try to ground our criteria in nature or society. Or with Kant we may try to invoke practical reason. If however we define God as the power that gives such criteria, it seems impossible to deny his existence.

Can we do without God understood as author of an infinite call? We might argue that the institution of the law depends on just such a call. In this sense Moses, the bringer of the law, is a solitary individual who has been called by God directly. Because God has called him, he can become the mediator between God and men, can bring them the law. Do we mortals need God in some such sense? Heidegger came to insist on this in his later writings.

In the first volume of *Either/Or* Kierkegaard gives us the description of a life that denies the second and third aspects of God. I think he has shown successfully that such a life is a life of despair, possible only in bad

---

437 See Karsten Harries "The Infinity of Man and the Infinity of God," *Infinity and Perspective*, pp. 160–183.

faith. More has not been shown. And it leaves us with the question: is bad faith better than no faith?

The second volume leaves us with two very different conceptions of the religious. The Judge, happy in the circle of his family, secure in his position in society, stands for one. For him the hour of the dreadful destruction of his city and of all he cherished has not yet arrived. For many others, very much like him, it all too soon was to arrive. Did they preserve their faith? What sort of faith?

The Judge's life, as presented to us in his letters, is haunted by the question: is this not perhaps also a life lived in bad faith, not so very different in the end from the life A caricatures with his discussion of Scribe's Emmeline? How open is he to reality? The relative absence of the supposedly all important saving wife from this second volume remains disturbing.

All the same, the Judge's claim that if we are to be saved at all, most of us are likely to be saved by another person, although not necessarily a woman, is difficult to dismiss. And to be thus saved we must be open to the other. Pride that insists on always being in the right stands in the way of such openness. In relation to the person I love I do not want to be in the right.

But what if that saving other dies, if our children are taken from us, fall ill and die, or are pointlessly slaughtered? If the society in which we felt secure and found our place is destroyed, as Jerusalem was to be destroyed? Are we confident that we, are we confident that our Judge would meet such a test and preserve his faith in God?

He might in his suffering seek out his old friend the parson who might attempt to build him up with his very different understanding of the religious, which allows him to remain happy, in the face of such calamities, secure in his knowledge that over against God we are always in the wrong. Nothing the world can throw at him can thus shake his love. But such steadfastness, too, is shadowed by the story of Emmeline, who holds on to her faith in first love with a strength unfazed by reality. Is this parson's ability to hold on to love of God even in the face of unspeakable horrors that suggest a world from which God is absent, not also in bad faith? What would constitute a convincing answer to that question?

## 10

A final concluding consideration: In “The Tragic in Ancient Drama,” A had presented us with his own Either/Or. Our modern age, he had suggested, “is conceited enough to disdain the tears of tragedy, but it is also conceited enough to want to do without mercy. And what, after all, is human life, the human race, when these two things are taken away? Either the sadness of the tragic or the profound sorrow and profound joy of religion.”<sup>438</sup> This may be the most profound “Either/Or” with which *Either/Or* leaves us. One could read this either/or as: either Nietzsche or Kierkegaard. Nietzsche understood tragedy as the art of the highest self-affirmation because it is born of and speaks to a love of life that remains open to all that so often makes reality horrible, remains open to the fact that sooner or later the time will come when we and all that we love and have achieved will be overtaken by time. A full self-affirmation is possible only to those who, willing power as we human beings cannot help but do, yet find the strength to forgive themselves and accept their ineliminable lack of power.

The parson’s message is not so very different. He too calls us to a love of life that remains open to the unjustifiable horrors of life. He knows the temptation to want to meet the horrors of the world with a heroic self-assertion. But he also knows that in the end all such attempts will fail. He finds his joy, not by finding within himself the strength to forgive himself his lack of power, but in his love of God, a love that cannot be justified, that common sense must judge absurd, a love that is inseparable from a faith that in the end we are not alone:

Wir alle fallen, Diese Hand da fällt.  
 Und sieh Dir andre an: es ist in allen.  
 Und doch ist Einer, welcher dieses Fallen  
 Unendlich sanft in seinen Händen hält.<sup>439</sup>

---

438 *EO1*, 146 / *SKS 2*, 146.

439 Rainer Maria Rilke “Herbst,” *Das Buch der Bilder, Werke*, vol. 1, p. 156.

## Bibliography

- Adler, A. P. *Populaire Foredrag over Hegel's objective Logik*, Copenhagen 1842.
- Alberti, Leon Battista *On Painting*, trans. and intro. John R. Spencer, New Haven and London: Yale UP 1956.
- Altizer, Thomas J. J. *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill 1961.
- *Gospel of Christian Atheism*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1966.
- Assmann, Jan *Die Zauberflöte. Oper und Mysterium*, Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag 2005.
- St. Augustin *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods, New York: The Modern Library 2000.
- Baeumler, Alfred *Das Irrationalitätsproblem in der Ästhetik und Logik des 18. Jahrhunderts bis zur Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1967.
- Baumgarten, Alexander Gottlieb *Metaphysica*, Halle 1779.
- *Reflections on Poetry*, trans. Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1954.
- Beiser, Frederck C. *The Romantic Imperative. The Concept of Early German Romanticism*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP 2003.
- Berlin, Isaiah *The Roots of Romanticism*, Princeton: Princeton UP 1999.
- Bøgeskov, Benjamin Olivares “Thomas Aquinas: Kierkegaard’s View Based on Scattered and Uncertain Sources” in *Kierkegaard and the Patristic and Medieval Traditions (Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources 4)*, ed. Jon Stewart, Hampshire and Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2007.
- Broch, Hermann “Hofmannsthal und seine Zeit” in *Dichten und Erkennen: Essays*, vol. 1, Zurich: Rhein Verlag 1955.
- “Einige Bemerkungen zum Problem des Kitsches” in *Dichten und Erkennen: Essays*, vol. 1, Zurich: Rhein Verlag 1955.
- *Der Tod des Vergil*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1958.
- Buber, Martin “Ich und Du” in *Das Dialogische Prinzip*, Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider 1965.
- Camus, Albert *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien, New York: Vintage 1991.
- Canaday, John *Mainstreams of Modern Art*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1959.
- Chamisso, Albert von *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte*, Nurnberg 1814.
- *Peter Schlemiel: the Man Who Sold His Shadow*, trans. Peter Wortsman, New York: Fromm International 1993.
- Davini, Simonella “Schopenhauer: Kierkegaard’s Late Encounter with His Opposite” in *Kierkegaard and His German Contemporaries. Tome I: Philosophy*

- (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources Reception and Resources* 6), ed. Jon Stewart, Hampshire and Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2007.
- Deleuze, Gilles *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, New York: Columbia UP 1994.
- Descartes, René *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, 2 vols., New York: Dover 1955.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1990.
- *Notes from Underground*, trans. and ed. Michael R. Katz, New York and London: Norton 2001.
- Dunning, Stephen N. *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Inwardness. A Structural Analysis of the Theory of Stages*, Princeton: Princeton UP 1985.
- Meister Eckhart *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. and intro. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, Mahway: Paulist Press 1981.
- Eriksen, Niels Nymann *Kierkegaard's Category of Repetition: A Reconstruction (Kierkegaard Studies: Monograph Series 5)*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter 2000.
- Friedan, Betty *The Feminine Mystique*, New York: Norton 1963.
- Friedrich, Hugo *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik*, Hamburg: Rowohlt 1956.
- Frisch, Max *Don Juan oder Die Liebe zur Geometrie*, 30<sup>th</sup> ed., Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 2006.
- Garff, Joakim *Søren Kierkegaard. A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP 2005.
- Glöckner, Dorothea *Kierkegaards Begriff der Wiederholung. Eine Studie zu seinem Freiheitsverständnis (Kierkegaard Studies: Monograph Series 3)*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter 1998.
- Gouwens, David J. *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of the Imagination*, New York: Peter Lang 1989.
- Greenberg, Clement *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Chicago: Chicago UP 1995.
- Grimsley, Ronald “Kierkegaard and Leibniz” in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1965.
- Hannay, Alastair *Kierkegaard. A Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2001.
- Hare, John E. “The Unhappiest One and the Structure of Kierkegaard's Either/Or” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Either/Or, Part 1*, vol. 3, ed. Robert L. Perkins: Macon, GA: Mercer University Press 1995.
- Harries, Karsten *In a Strange Land. An Exploration of Nihilism*, PhD Dissertation, Yale University 1961.
- *The Meaning of Modern Art*, Evanston: Northwestern UP 1968.
- “Transformations of the Subjunctive” in *Thought*, vol. 55, no. 218, 1980.
- “Modernity's Bad Conscience” in *AA Files*, no. 10, Autumn 1985.
- *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, Cambridge, Mass., and London: The MIT Press 2000.
- *Infinity and Perspective*, Cambridge, Mass., and London: The MIT Press 2001.
- “Waarom moeten we bang zijn voor kitsch,” trans. Jan Willem Reimtsma, *Nexus*, 2007, no. 47, pp. 127–147.

- Hay, Sergia Karen "Sharing Style and Thesis: Kierkegaard's Appropriation of Hamann's Work" in *Kierkegaard and His German Contemporaries. Tome III: Literature and Aesthetics (Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources 6)*, ed. John Stewart, Hampshire and Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2007.
- Hegel, G. W. F. *Werke*, 20 vols., ed. Eva Moldenhauer et al., Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1970.
- Heiberg, J. L. *Ledetraad ved Forelæsningerne over Philosophiens Philosophie eller den speculative Logik ved den kongelige militære Høiskole*, Copenhagen 1832.
- *Outline of the Philosophy of Philosophy or Speculative Logic. A Guide to Lectures at the Royal Military College in Heiberg's Speculative Logic and Other Texts (Texts from Golden Age Denmark 2)*, ed. and trans. Jon Stewart, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel 2006.
- Heidegger, Martin *Sein und Zeit*, 7th ed., Tübingen: Niemeyer 1953.
- *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, New York: Harper and Row 1962.
- *Wegmarken, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 9, Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann 1976.
- Hitler, Adolf *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin 1999.
- Hofmannsthal, Hugo von *Sämtliche Werke*, 31 vols., ed. Hans-Albrecht Koch, Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer 1998.
- Hölderlin, Friedrich *Hyperion, Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Günther Mieth, vol. 1, Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag 1970.
- Jahn, Hans Henny *Perrudja*, 2 vols., Berlin: Gustav Kiepenheuer 1929.
- Jaspers, Karl *Philosophie*, 3 vols., Berlin: Springer 1932.
- Kangas, David J. "The Very Opposite of Beginning with Nothing: Guilt Consciousness in Kierkegaard's 'The Gospel of Suffering' IV" in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, vol. 15, ed. Robert L. Perkins, Macon, GA: Mercer UP 2005.
- *Kierkegaard's Instance. On Beginnings*, Bloomington: Indiana UP 2007.
- Kant, Immanuel *Werke*, Akademie Textausgabe, 9 vols., Berlin and New York: de Gruyter 1968.
- *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar, Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett 1987.
- Kierkegaard, Søren *Either/Or. A Fragment of Life*, vol. 1, trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson, Princeton: Princeton UP 1944.
- *Entweder/Oder, Erster Teil, Gesammelte Werke*, vol.1, trans. Emanuel Hirsch, Köln: Gütersloher Verlag Haus and Gerd Mohn 1951–1969.
- Kleinert, Markus "Apparent and Hidden Relations between Kierkegaard and Jean Paul" in *Kierkegaard and His German Contemporaries. Tome III: Literature and Aesthetics (Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources 6)*, ed. Jon Stewart, Aldershot: Ashgate 2008.
- Kundera, Milan *The Unbearable Lightness of Being: A Novel*, trans. Michael Henry Heim, New York: Harper 1999.
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm G. W. *Leibniz's Monadology. An Edition for Students*, Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh UP 1991.
- Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP 1984.

- Loos, Adolf "Die Potemkin'sche Stadt" in *Über Architektur. Ausgewählte Schriften. Die Originaltexte*, ed. Adolf Opel, Vienna: Georg Prachner 1995.
- "Potemkin City" in *Spoken into the Void. Collected Essays 1897–1900*, trans. Jane O. Newman and John H. Smith, Cambridge, Mass., and London: The MIT Press 1982.
- Lowrie, Walter *A Short Life of Kierkegaard*, Princeton: Princeton UP 1958.
- Luther, Martin *Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 120 vols., Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler Verlag 2000–2007.
- Lisi, Leonardo F. "On the Reception History of Either/Or in the Anglo-Saxon World" in *Kierkegaard Studies: Yearbook 2008*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Herman Deuser and K. Brian Söderquist, New York and Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 2008, pp. 327–364.
- Lyotard, Jean-François "Answer to the Question: What is the Postmodern" in *The Postmodern Explained: correspondence 1982–1985*, trans. Don Barry et al., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993.
- "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1984.
- Mackey, Louis "Søren Kierkegaard. The Poetry of Inwardness" in *Existential Philosophers. Kierkegaard to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Geroge A. Schrader, New York: McGraw-Hill 1967.
- *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1971.
- Magurshak, Dan "The Concept of Anxiety: The Keystone of the Kierkegaard-Heidegger Relationship" in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Anxiety*, vol. 8, ed. Robert L. Perkins, Macon, GA: Mercer UP 1985.
- Martensen, Hans Lassen *Mester Eckhart. Et Bidrag til at oplyse Middelalderens Mystik*, Copenhagen 1840.
- "Meister Eckhart: A Study in Speculative Theology" in *Between Hegel and Kierkegaard: Hans L. Martensen's Philosophy of Religion*, trans. and ed. Curtis L. Thompson and David J. Kangas, Atlanta: Scholars Press 1997.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, 15 vols., ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag 1980.
- *Werke*, ed. Karl Schlechta, 3 vols., Munich: Hanser 1966.
- Novalis *Schriften: die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, ed. Paul Kluckhohn und Richard Samuel, 2 vols., Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer 1960.
- Olesen, Tonny Aagaard "A Historical Introduction to Kierkegaard's Schelling" in *Kierkegaard and His German Contemporaries. Tome I: Philosophy (Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources 6)*, ed. John Stewart, Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2007.
- Otto, Rudolf *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey, 2nd edition, Oxford: Oxford UP 1958.
- Paul, Jean *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, Hamburg: F. Meiner 1990.
- Poe, Edgar Allan "The Philosophy of Composition" in *Graham's Magazine*, April, 1846.

- Puchniak, Robert "Kierkegaard's Tempered Admiration of Augustine" in *Kierkegaard and the Patristic and Medieval Traditions (Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception, Resources 4)*, ed. Jon Stewart, Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2008.
- Rapic, Smail "Lichtenberg's Aphoristic Thought and Kierkegaard's Concept of the 'Subjective Existing Thinker'" in *Kierkegaard and His German Contemporaries. Tome I: Philosophy (Kierkegaard Research: Sources Reception and Resources 6)*, ed. Jon Stewart, Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2007.
- Ratzinger, Joseph *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster, San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1990.
- Rehm, Walter *Experimentum Medietatis. Studien zur Geistes- und Literaturgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Munich: Hermann Rinn 1947.  
 – *Kierkegaard und der Verführer*, Munich: Hermann Rinn 1949.  
 – "Kierkegaards Antigone" in *Begegnungen und Probleme*, Bern: A. Franke 1957.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria "Das Buch der Bilder" in *Werke*, 6 vols., Frankfurt a.M.: Insel 1980.
- Robbe-Grillet, Alain *Last Year at Marienbad*, text for the film by Alain Resnais, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Grove Press 1962.
- Robinson, John A. T. *Honest to God*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1963.
- Roos, Carl *Kierkegaard og Goethe*, Copenhagen: Gad 1955.
- Šajda, Peter "Meister Eckhart: The Patriarch of German Speculation Who Was a Lebemeister" in *Kierkegaard and the Patristic and Medieval Traditions (Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources 4)*, ed. Jon Stewart: Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2007.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul *Being and Nothingness*, trans. and intro. Hazel E. Barnes, New York: Philosophical Library 1956.  
 – *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander, New York: New Directions Publishing 1964.
- Sedlmayr, Hans "Kierkegaard über Picasso" in *Der Tod des Lichtes. Übergangene Perspektiven zur modernen Kunst*, Salzburg: Otto Müller 1964.
- Schlegel, Friedrich *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, 35 vols., ed. Ernst Behler et al., Munich 1958–2006.
- Schmitt, Carl *Politische Romantik*, Munich and Leipzig 1925.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung, Werke*, 5 vols., ed. Ludger Lütkehaus, Zurich: Haffman 1991.
- Spengler, Oswald *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, 2 vols., Munich 1923.  
 – *The Decline of the West*, 2 vols., trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, New York 1926–1928.
- Stewart, Jon *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2003.
- Söderquist, K. Brian *The Isolated Self. Truth and Untruth in Søren Kierkegaard's On The Concept of Irony*, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Forlag 2007.
- Søltøft, Pia *Svimmelhedens Etik – om forholdet mellem den enkelte og den anden hos Buber, Lévinas og især Kierkegaard*, Copenhagen: Gads Forlag 2000.
- Tudvad, Peter *Kierkegaards Jyllandsrejse*, Copenhagen: Politikens Forlag 2006.

- Van Buren, Paul M. *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel: Based on an Analysis of its Language*, New York: Macmillan 1963.
- Walsh, Sylvia *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State UP 1994.
- Wendel, Herman *Review of Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and Schleiermacher's Vertraute Briefe über Friedrich Schlegels Lucinde in Die Neue Zeit*, vol. 26, 1907/08, vol. 2.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, Werke, vol. 1, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1984.
- Yeats, W. B. *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, revised second ed., ed. Richard J. Finneran, New York: Scribner 1996.

## Abbreviations

### *Danish Abbreviations*

- Ktl. *Auktionsprotokol over Søren Kierkegaards bogsamling*, ed. H. P. Rohde, Copenhagen: The Royal Library 1967.
- Pap. *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, vol. I–XI, 3, ed. P. A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr and E. Torsting, Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag, Copenhagen 1909–48; second enlarged edition, vol. I–XI, 3, ed. N. Thulstrup, vol. XII–XIII (supplementary volumes), ed. N. Thulstrup, vol. XIV–XVI *Index* by N. J. Cappelørn, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1968–78.
- SKS *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, Anne Mette Hansen and Johnny Kondrup, vols. 1–55 (bd. 1–13 + K1–13 and 17–26 + K17–26, 1997–2009), Copenhagen: Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret and G. E. C. Gads Forlag 1997–.

### *English Abbreviations*

- JP *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk, vol. 1–6, vol. 7 *Index and Composite Collation*, Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press 1967–78.
- CI *The Concept of Irony*, KW II.
- CUP1 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, KW XII, 1.
- CUP2 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, KW XII, 2.
- EO1 *Either/Or*, Part I, KW III.
- EO2 *Either/Or*, Part II, KW IV.
- FT *Fear and Trembling*, KW VI.
- KJN *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Alastair Hannay, David Kangas, Bruce H. Kirmmse, Vanessa Rumble, K. Brian Söderquist and George Pattison, Vol. 1–, Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press 2007–.
- PF *Philosophical Fragments*, KW VII.
- R *Repetition*, KW VI.