
Kierkegaard: Poet Penitent

By John W. Elrod

I should like to begin with the observation that in this article I am concerned with Kierkegaard as a religious person and not with his books. Even though I must from time to time discuss some of the ideas in some of his books, it is always the meaning of the act of writing that produces the books rather than the books and their ideas themselves that is my central concern. The implications, if any, of my argument for interpreting Kierkegaard's ideas as they are developed in his books will not be pursued here.

The Melancholy Poet

When Kierkegaard writes about melancholy he seems to mean the following. It is a reflexive emotion in which the individual is himself the object of his mood. Unlike, for example sorrow and anger, melancholy is inwardly directed at the subject of the mood rather than outwardly toward some external object. The melancholic apprehends himself as desiring to replace the conventions, customs, even the perceptions, of everydayness, which he regards with a mixture of weariness, contempt, and alienation, with an idealization of his own life. Melancholy is a seductive emotion in that it tends to perpetuate itself because of the pleasure it brings. As such, it cultivates a brooding passivity and incapacity for an action that might break the spell which it has cast over the melancholic. Finally, melancholy possesses a strong trace of self-consciousness since the melancholic is aware both of himself as melancholy and something of its nature.

Kierkegaard's journals are crowded with entries about his melancholy and related problems. Taken together, these entries suggest that Kierkegaard believed his melancholy to be a problem that he inherited from his father and which induced guilt, distrust of other people and an intense dissatisfaction with the effete mediocrity of what Kierkegaard called the bourgeois marketplace mentality of Copenhagen.¹ This melancholy became an essential dimension of his nature² and rendered him, he thought, unfit for both marriage and a career.

Thus, in 1838, Kierkegaard already sadly recognized that »inwardly shattered as I was, with no prospect of leading a happy life on earth, ... devoid of all hope for a pleasant happy future – as this naturally proceeds from and is inherent in the historical continuity of home and family life – what wonder then that in despairing desperation I seized hold of the

intellectual side in man exclusively, hung on to that, with the result that the thought of my eminent mental faculties was my only comfort, and men of no importance to me«. ³ In place of marriage and career, Kierkegaard gave his life to writing.

Not only did his melancholy provide the occasion for his becoming an author but also its substance. Reflecting back upon itself his melancholy imagination found much with which to work creatively. Clearly one with less melancholy, intelligence, and imagination would not have been as disturbed as the young Kierkegaard by his father's confession, but Kierkegaard poetically elevated it to the level of a profoundly disturbing drama encompassing the lives of every living member of his family.⁴ And Regina's role in the origination of Kierkegaard's authorship is well known. »Alas, she could not break the silence of my melancholy. That I love her – nothing is more certain – and in this my melancholy got enough to feed upon, O, it got a frightful extra measure. That I became a writer was due essentially to her, my melancholy, and my money«. ⁵ The poetic description of the struggle between the aesthete and the moralist in *Either/Or* and between the Knights of Infinite Resignation and Faith in *Fear and Trembling* bear witness to Kierkegaard's relation to Regina. *Repetition*, too, poetically recapitulates certain psychological dimensions of his engagement to her. There appears to be little that develops in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings that is not in some manner connected with his own interior life. In a perceptive and revealing 1848 journal entry, Kierkegaard explicitly acknowledges the intimate relation between his own life and his work as an author.

»How often this same thing has happened to me that now has happened to me again! I am submerged in the deepest suffering of despondency, so tied up in mental knots that I cannot get free, and since it is all connected with my personal life I suffer indescribably. And then after a short time, like an abscess it comes to a head and breaks – and inside is the loveliest and richest creativity – and the very thing I must use at the moment«. ⁶

There appears, as this passage clearly illustrates, to be an indissoluble link between the outlook of Kierkegaard's main characters and his own psychic life. In fact the imaginative world that he created is one which does not exist apart from his own interiority but is, rather, one which plays upon the many dimensions of its suffering and melancholy.⁷ Every relation, event, and thought is transmuted by the power of Kierkegaard's imagination.

The pseudonymous productions consistently bear poetic witness to his melancholy relation to those around him. In *Stages on Life's Way*, Quidam's Diary contains six entries that refer to Kierkegaard's childhood and his relation to his father. By title, these are: »Quiet Despair«; »The Leper's Soliloquy«; »Solomon's Dream«; »A Possibility«; »To be Learnt by Heart – Periander«; and »Nebuchadnezzar«. These six entries in the Diary are aberrations from both its central theme of his love for a young woman and its form of Morning and Midnight entries, the former recalling happy

recollections of his love and the latter his present unhappy and sorry state without love. The Diary, of course, is based on Kierkegaard's love affair with Regina as are the first three pseudonymous publications: *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Repetition*. Another diary, »The Diary of a Seducer«, is based partially on Kierkegaard's engagement, although it cannot as a whole be read as an accurate poetic description of his relation to her, even though certain of its entries do have such value. These four pseudonymous works are clearly examples of what Kierkegaard meant when he claimed that in his relation to Regina his melancholy »got enough to feed upon«. ⁸ The necessity of choosing either the aesthetic or the ethical life (*Either/Or*), the psychological dimensions of recollecting in imagination a past event or relation (*Repetition*), the religious faith that believes that for God it is possible to repeat in actuality what is given up in resignation (*Fear and Trembling*), and the joys of fresh love along with the despair of its loss (*Stages on Life's Way*) all bear poetic witness to Kierkegaard's three year romance and engagement with Regina.

If relations and events associated with his father and fiancée provided ample material for his melancholy imagination, his thought in relation to speculative philosophy provided another sort of material for the same poetic mediation. By the time the pseudonym Johannes Climacus began to write *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard's authorial interests had broadened from the immediate existential issues generated by his personal life to include Christianity and its speculative reinterpretation by German and Danish idealist philosophers and theologians. Describing himself now as a »poet of the religious«, who had in »wonderful ways ... been led into this in early life«, Kierkegaard accepted his task as one of setting »forth the Christian qualifications in all their ideality«. »With poetic fervor«, Kierkegaard attempted »to present the total ideality [of Christianity] at its most ideal ...« ⁹ Kierkegaard's encounter with Christianity, as in his relation with Regina and his father, became the occasion for exploring poetically a wide spectrum of issues related to the life of the spirit. Avoiding these issues on the level of everyday lived experience, Kierkegaard embraced them in his imagination as a poet of the human spirit.

Kierkegaard suffered no illusions about the relation of his melancholy and his writing. Reflecting back in 1848 on the distance he had travelled as a writer, he wrote that »assigned from childhood to a life of torment that perhaps few can conceive of, plunged into the deepest despondency, and from this despondency again into despair, I came to understand myself by writing«. ¹⁰ His melancholy was kept away by his writing in the sense that it produced thoughts, images, and ideas with whose development Kierkegaard could thoroughly identify. Placing himself in the harness of his imaginative productions, Kierkegaard's melancholy is quieted by their temporally unrestricted capacity for growth and development.

»It is remarkable how rigorously, in a certain sense, I am being educated. Now and then I am placed down in the dark hole; I creep around there in

agony and pain, and see nothing, no way out. Then suddenly there stirs in my soul a thought so vivid that it seems as if I had never had it before, even though it is not unfamiliar to me, but previously I had been married to it, only so to speak with the left hand and now I am married to it with the right. Now when it has established itself in me, I am cared for a bit. I am taken by the arms, and I, who had been scrunched together like a grasshopper, now grow up again, as sound, thriving, happy, warm, and lithe as a new-born infant. Then I must give my word, as it were, that I will follow this thought to the uttermost; I pledge my life and now I am buckled in the harness. I cannot pause and my powers hold out. Then I finish, and now it all starts over again«. ¹¹

Kierkegaard then confesses that »If I refrain from it for just a few days, I immediately get sick, overwhelmed, depressed, and my head gets stodgy and weighted down«. ¹²

While Kierkegaard was under no illusion about the melancholy motivation of his pseudonymous writings and their necessity for his spiritual health, he appeared to be troubled that his education had taken this exclusively imaginative form. An insightfully self-critical journal entry indicates his concern that he had so thoroughly imaginatively succumbed to his melancholy that it is not himself who had been educated by his writings but rather his pseudonymous self. Kierkegaard worried that the pseudonyms were the fictive education of an equally fictive self.

»Through many years my melancholy was the cause that in the deepest sense I could not attain to the point of saying Thou of myself. Between my melancholy and my Thou there lay a whole world of imagination. It is this that I in part emptied out in the pseudonyms. Just as he who had no happy home fares forth as much as possible and fain would be away from his home, so my melancholy kept me outside myself, while in exploration and poetical experience I have travelled through a whole world of imagination. Like one who has been put in possession of a great landed estate and cannot get through becoming acquainted with it – so by reason of melancholy I have comported myself toward the possibility«. ¹³

Reflection, poetic or otherwise, that begins in alienation is apt to perpetuate it. Certainly, this passage makes this point. Removed by melancholy from those persons, events, and ideas that shaped his personal history, Kierkegaard's poetic reflection transmutes this history into an imaginative and fictitious one that further accentuates the alienating spell cast by his melancholy. So fully removed is Kierkegaard by his melancholy imagination from those relations that would constitute his temporal and concrete self that he is led to conclude that »it seems as if I have loved myself only or mainly in the idea ...«. ¹⁴ And inasmuch as his creativity moved him toward the religious, ¹⁵ his love for God during this period was equally abstract. In an 1850 journal entry, Kierkegaard, clearly referring to his own experience, observed that »He in whose soul there is an inborn dread can therefore have even a visionary idea of God's love. But he cannot make his relation to God concrete«. ¹⁶ Bathed in melancholy and imaginatively

related to persons, ideas, and events, it is perfectly correct of Kierkegaard to declare that his relation both to himself and God is essentially abstract in nature.

Kierkegaard's criticisms of Adler in *On Authority and Revelation* also have a ring of intimacy and familiarity which suggests that Kierkegaard is criticizing himself as much as this deluded parson. A long passage in which Kierkegaard complains of Adler's use of reflection in relation to his alleged revelation clearly applies, as he must have understood, to himself as well. He writes that: »it is a suspicious circumstance when a man, instead of getting out of a tension by resolution and action, becomes literarily productive about his situation in the tension. Then no work is done to get out of the situation, but the reflection fixes the situation before the eyes of reflection, and thereby fixes (in a different sense of the word) the man. The more abundantly thoughts and expressions proffer themselves to the writer, the more quickly the productivity advances – in the wrong direction – all the more dangerous it is, and all the more hidden is it from the person concerned that his labor, his most exacting labor, perhaps also, for a third person who has the total view, his very interesting labor – is a labor to get himself deeper and deeper involved. For he does not work himself loose, he works himself fast, and makes himself interesting by reflecting about the tension«.¹⁷

Kierkegaard here observes that by reflection and literary productivity Adler is both made into a kind of man he otherwise would not have been and escapes the action and resolution required by his situation. Such criticisms as aptly apply to what I am calling the melancholy poet who through his imaginative productivity makes himself into a fictive being. Like Johannes de Silentio, the author of *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard declared that »as poet and philosopher I have presented everything in the medium of the imagination, myself living in resignation«.¹⁸ The drama of the pseudonyms tells the story of birth and rebirth, sin and salvation, the fall and redemption, but it is only an imagined, not an embodied, narrative. For Kierkegaard is a Knight of Infinite Resignation, who can only admire those who are able to embody the story – himself ephemerally participating in it only as an idea.

This ephemera was not completely obvious to the melancholy poet. That he existed essentially as an idea in this pseudonymous period was a spiritual reality that slowly became apparent to Kierkegaard as he struggled for a way beyond the life of pseudonymity after the publication of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. That Kierkegaard experienced a fundamental metamorphosis after 1846 concerning his conceptions of both himself and his authorial vocation cannot be doubted. During this time, he began to struggle against the lure of the melancholy poet and succeeded in bringing about a fundamental change in himself and his writing. This transition can be made clearer by comparing the melancholy and the ethical poets' conceptions of the religious categories of the thorn in the flesh and penitence.

The Thorn in the Flesh

The 1843 discourse, bearing the title »The Thorn in the Flesh«, begins with the observation that the term has fallen into deplorable misuse and that a clarification of its correct meaning can be achieved by studying its original usage in the writings of the apostle Paul.¹⁹ Kierkegaard objected to the current usage of the term that identified it with »external suffering«. A careful study of its Pauline sense will show that Saint Paul did not use this term to cover the many »external sufferings« that he experienced as an apostle of Christ. Neither being jeered at as a madman, shunned as a scandal, nakedness, imprisonment, chains, the outrages of misunderstanding, anxiety over the spiritual well-being of the community, nor seeing a good cause abandoned by one's friends can be identified with the »thorn in the flesh«.²⁰ The phrase, as Paul used it, refers to the inward »perils of the spiritual life«²¹ in which one's relation to God is endangered. The individual cannot be troubled by this »spiritual affliction« so long as he possesses »the triumphant assurance that he is in understanding with God«.²² Kierkegaard assures his reader that spiritual happiness and affliction are in no manner dependent upon the contingencies of finitude. He, accordingly, reminds the reader not to »forget that neither spiritual happiness nor spiritual suffering is something external, of which one might say in truth and all sincerity: 'The circumstances of my life did not afford opportunity for me to experience this!«²³ To make such a claim, one would have to presuppose that spiritual happiness is dependent upon the fortunate contingencies of life, and this view of spirit Kierkegaard clearly denied. Since the life of spirit is not essentially dependent upon good fortune, neither can its denial be dependent upon bad fortune.²⁴

The thorn in the flesh is, nevertheless, »the contrast of the unspeakable bliss of the Spirit«,²⁵ which is experienced in a mystic encounter with the divine.

»To have been carried out into the third heaven, to have been hidden in the bosom of eternal happiness, to have been enlarged in God – and now to be tethered by the thorn in the flesh in the thralldom of temporal experience! To have been unutterably rich in God, and now to be crushed to flesh and blood, to dust and corruption! To have been in the presence of God, and now to be forsaken of God, forsaken by one's self, the only consolation a poor, deranged memory«.²⁶

Here the thorn is clearly identified with temporal existence. Included in this limitation, of course, must be all the relationships and events which are essentially dependent upon a bodily existence in time. In this discourse, it is this mode of existence which tethers the spirit and prevents it from enjoying an »unspeakable« happiness in an eternal identification with God. This tethering of the spirit in the confines of time is, in a sense, a fate worse than death. While death separates the individual from time and is in this sense a deliverance, the thorn in the flesh is a separation that: »shuts him out from the eternal, and so is an imprisonment, which again leaves the spirit sighing in an earthen vessel, in the straitened room, in spiritual exile;

for the home of the spirit is in the eternal and the infinite. That very instant everything begins again as from the beginning. He who has been outside the body now returns to the body; but this condition of thus being within himself, is not the condition of freedom and of the emancipated spirit. So the unspeakable happiness is past, the harvest song of rejoicing is silent, again there must be sowing of tears, the spirit must again sit oppressed, must again sigh, and only God knows, what the sigh does not know, whether or not the harp of joy will again be tuned in the secret places of the soul. The man is returned to himself. No longer is he happy in being saved from himself for himself, and in being transfigured in God ...«.27

The lament of resignation could not be more clearly stated. Existing in time is an exile in which the individual is imprisoned in and oppressed by his own body. Here he must live unhappily in a state of material mediocrity not knowing whether ever again he will experience spiritual happiness.

On this view, then, the thorn in the flesh is temporal existence. Just how time becomes the thorn is not difficult to explain. In most cases, and Saint Paul's in particular, a past event becomes an inescapable and tormenting memory that invades every dimension of time. We cannot be certain about this past even in Saint Paul's life. Perhaps it was his silent and unprotesting witness of the stoning of Stephen or his persecution of the early Christians. It does not really matter, for what is important is that the past »holds such a claim upon his soul no remorse can quite redeem, no consolation of God can quite blot out, but only God himself in the unspeakable silence of eternal happiness«.28 The accusing and condemning past is neither forgotten nor destroyed but gains in such intensity and scope that it comes to fill up all the time. Kierkegaard writes that in analyzing this problem »we are speaking about ... how the past, from which the soul believed it had redeemed itself, again stood there with its demand, not like a memory, but more terrible than ever before, through having entered into a conspiracy with the future. We are speaking about – the thorn in a the flesh«.29 Time becomes a thorn when an unspeakable past event becomes the future, when memory becomes anticipation, when necessity yokes possibility. Under such conditions, this past event sours time and divides the self so that its transfiguration and redemption can occur only in the stillness of eternity. Here the spirit strives against the body, eternity against time. And in that brief and elusive moment of emancipation, the spirit breaks free of its bodily imprisonment in time to wander effortlessly in the land of pure ideality.

Just as it is not necessary that we know in Saint Paul's case the particular event that disfigured time by making it a thorn, so we need not worry ourselves about that past event in Kierkegaard's life which also made time his prison. It does not matter, at least according to the view of the thorn in this discourse. Here the specific nature of the past event is not relevant. What is important for our understanding of Kierkegaard as a writer is that, on this view of the thorn, he came to view temporal existence and its possibilities as an impediment to an eternal happiness. Succumbing to his

melancholy, which led him away from time toward the eternal, Kierkegaard became a writer and imaginatively constructed a world of ideality in which his spirit could live free of the exigencies of time. In an 1849 journal entry, Kierkegaard candidly admitted to this spectral quality about himself. »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 everyday 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«. ³⁰

It is very important to note that the idea of the thorn in the flesh is an idealized one, because it is itself a product of Kierkegaard's melancholy imagination. The conception of time as a prison is a function of his artistic genius. The past event is idealized as a thorn that symbolizes the individual's destiny in time. His past becomes a dreadful future, his memory a despairing anticipation. Kierkegaard's and Paul's memories assumed the enervating power they possessed precisely because both men were religious geniuses who were capable of religiously idealizing both time as a thorn and the eternal as its transfiguration. Kierkegaard was, then, very much a prisoner of his own genius. For him, at least as a melancholy poet, art was better than life. The best way to live one's life is by writing about it in such a way that it receives a lustre, a certainty, a completeness and finality, a non-transitoriness that rids it of suffering and dissolves it of the necessity for patience, courage, and resolve – all qualities that it could not possess in the immediate life of everydayness, if ever at all.

Kierkegaard's Judge William expresses this point quite clearly in one of his letters to the despairing young aesthete. In his letter, he writes that »the poet sees the ideals, but he must flee from the world in order to rejoice in them, he cannot bear about in the midst of life's confusions these divine images within him, cannot tranquilly pursue his course unaffected by the caricature of these ideals which appear on all sides, not to speak of having the strength to clothe himself in them«. ³¹ In a journal entry, Kierkegaard reinforces one of Judge William's two main points when he writes that »I need the enchantment of literary composition in order to forget all the crude trivialities of life«. ³² In his short book on Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Ralph Harper nicely captured the other of Judge William's two main points when he writes that both writers wanted to create something radically new »and yet creation by rhetoric was all either could look forward to«. ³³ Bored and troubled by the exigencies of time, Kierkegaard sought its religious transfiguration but, as a melancholy poet, advanced no further than the poetic creations of his melancholy imagination.

The melancholy poet affirms the religious imagination at his journey's end, inwardness as the proper domicile of the spirit, and time as the thorn which blocks the door to inwardness. »Creation by rhetoric« carves out an inward world for the melancholy poet in which his spirit enjoys a union with God that is undisturbed by the exigencies of bodily existence in time. But the ethical poet has a different view. While he agrees with the

melancholy poet that time is the thorn in the flesh, he does not accept his view that the spirit should seek to escape time into the world of inwardness created by the religious imagination. This poet understands the religious imagination's world of inwardness as the penultimate stage along life's way. This world should ultimately be temporalized by the poet's resolve to live temporally with the thorn in the flesh.

Under the pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard developed the ethical poet's view of the thorn in the flesh in a long passage in his *Sickness Unto Death*.³⁴ This passage, like the edifying discourse, reflects a concern with some past event that has become an intolerable burden in the poet's life. Here Kierkegaard speaks of it as a »fixed point« in time past that the poet cannot accept as his own, and, as with the discourse, this past »fixed point« has become so thoroughly temporalized in his life that he seeks refuge in the religious imagination. But now this poet agonizes over his difficulty in accepting his thorn. The difficulty is now, not how to escape, but how to accept his thorn in the flesh. Time is not spirit's prison but its proper domicile. The ethical poet is, however, confronted with the problem of domesticating time because of his unwillingness to accept the »fixed point« in time past by belonging to his real self. He »would like so very much to be himself before God, but with the exclusion of the fixed point where the self suffers; there in despair he does not will to be himself. He hopes that eternity will take it away, and here in time, no matter how much he suffers under it, he cannot resolve to take it upon himself, cannot humble himself under it in faith«. ³⁵ He continues »to poetize God as somewhat different from what God is, a bit more like the fond father who indulges his child's wish far too much«. ³⁶

Here the ethical poet shows sympathy for and an understanding of the melancholy poet's vision. Wishful thinking's poetized God is not in an utterly false and illusory world. »Yet this poet's description of the religious – just like that other poet's descriptions of erotic love – has a charm, a lyrical verve that no married man's and no His Reverend's have. Nor is what he says untrue, by no means; his presentation is simply his happier, his better I«. ³⁷ Nevertheless, the ethical poet concludes that »Christianly understood, every poet-existence (esthetics notwithstanding) is sin, the sin of poetizing instead of being, of relating to the good and the true through the imagination instead of being that – that is, existentially striving to be that«. ³⁸ The melancholy poet's inward world that is produced by the religious imagination is a world of sin, because it is not a temporalized world that includes the poet's body and hence his thorn in the flesh. The melancholy poet's inwardness reveals an absence of faith, because he will not accept his thorn and exist in time. ³⁹ In his ultimate distrust of time he does not believe that for God all things are possible – even the existential embodiment of one's »better I« in time. The melancholy poet seeks instead to create himself in words alone; he is the logos in its disembodiment. He does not believe the Christian incarnational claim that the word became flesh and dwelt among others. The ethical poet at least knows that the Christian faith strives

for the embodiment of the word, strives to clothe the ethereal spirit of inwardness in the recalcitrant body of time, even though he himself has not achieved that state of being. Thus, to accept in faith one's thorn in the flesh, as the poet-author of *Sickness Unto Death* recommends, involves nothing less than the acceptance of one's self in its incarnate form. The key difference, then, between the melancholy and ethical poets is that the former does not understand and strive for this moment of grace in time as does the latter.

The Poet and Penitence

Corresponding to the ethical poet's view of the thorn in the flesh is a collection of post 1846 journal entries concerning penitence. In these entries, Kierkegaard confessed to having been a penitent from the moment that he began to write. Even though these penitential self-references begin to appear only when Kierkegaard began trying to put the pseudonymous authorship behind him, they nevertheless claim that he has been a penitent from the very beginning and that, concerning his life, »the world missed the point; it did not perceive that from the beginning I was a penitent ... I was a penitent when I put the first line in print, and I am that now [in 1848]«.⁴⁰ In fact, the world so misunderstood me, insisted Kierkegaard, that it »never dreamed that the author of *Either/Or* had said goodbye to the world long before, that he spent much of his day in fear and trembling reading devotional books, in prayer and supplication. Least of all did it think that he was and is conscious of himself as a penitent from the very first line that he wrote«.⁴¹ Kierkegaard confessed that penitence »explains me at the deepest level«.⁴² Given his essentially religious nature, we cannot doubt this confession, although we must make a distinction between the penitence of the ethical poet and the penitence of a melancholy poet – a distinction that Kierkegaard himself did not make.

By the time that these entries began to appear in the journals, it is safe to assume that the religious mentality of the ethical poet had come to dominate Kierkegaard's mind. Thus, the penitence which he admits to having is consistent with the notion of the thorn in the flesh developed in *Sickness Unto Death*. The penitence of the ethical poet is a desire for forgiveness for his being unable to accept and to live positively with his thorn in the flesh. More broadly, from the standpoint of the ethical poet, Kierkegaard viewed his great sin as one of not being able to affirm temporal existence and its possibilities. This conception of his sin became concrete in Kierkegaard's troubled concern over his being unable to enter the universally human. A decision to marry or to take an ecclesiastical appointment would certainly have brought Kierkegaard squarely into the universally human and, hence, into a temporalized existence. But, as we know, both options and, thus, the universally human, remained closed to him. In an 1849 journal entry, Kierkegaard explicitly related his having collided with the universally human with his being a penitent⁴³ and in other entries, which cast a retrospective interpretive glance back to the time of

his engagement, Kierkegaard clearly identified his need for forgiveness in addition to his melancholy as a reason for his being unable to marry. Penitent in relation to his thorn and, therefore, unable to affirm a temporalized existence, Kierkegaard was unwilling to marry. His sin of self-denial blocked his way into marriage and the universally human. »What was my thought when I left her? It was: I am a penitent; marriage is an impossibility; there will always be a shadow to make it unhappy and that also protests the wedding«.44 »If I have not been a penitent, if I had not had my *vita ante acta*, if I had not had my depression – marriage to her would have made me happier than I had ever dreamed of becoming«.45

This confession is not all that Kierkegaard has to say about the matter. He did not recoil from placing himself in an unfavorable light in relation to his broken engagement when he admitted that »being the person I unfortunately am, I must say that I could become happier in my unhappiness without her than with her ...«.46 The unhappiness of a broken love in time became the basis for a poet's happiness in the recollection of that love in the inward world imagined into existence by the mind of a melancholy poet. The sin of self-denial, of non-self-acceptance, was, then, compounded by the poet's flight into the fantasy world of inwardness where the self and its love are transfigured into a disembodied and eternal ideal. In 1849, Kierkegaard admitted that »until now I have been a poet, absolutely nothing else, and it is a desperate struggle to will to go out beyond my limits«.47 He further confessed in this same year that from a religious point of view »the poetic element« in him was an imperfection48 and that »insofar as I am a little more than a poet, I am essentially a penitent ...«.49 Thus, as an ethical poet, Kierkegaard took the position that his penitence was occasioned not simply by his inability to affirm a temporalized existence but also by his compounding this sin through the poetizing of his life. We should, I believe, not hesitate to believe Kierkegaard when he confessed after 1846 that the occasion of the ethical poet's penitence is his earlier life as a melancholy poet.

But it could not have always been so with respect to Kierkegaard's religiously penitential stance toward himself. Surely the melancholy poet's penitence was of a different order given his understanding of the thorn in the flesh. For him, time is not a burden to be accepted but a hindrance to be overcome. The melancholy poet's bodily existence in time constitutes a guilt that weighs down the soul and prevents its eternal union with the divine. The penitent in this case seeks forgiveness for this guilt so that he can be released from it and take flight into the timeless world of the eternal. The melancholy poet seeks to escape time and his guilt by carving out an imaginary world of inwardness where the drama of sin and salvation is played out in a make-believe world. The melancholy poet is convinced of the superiority of art to life and penitently seeks to rid himself of those passions, acts, and desires that interfere with the complete transfiguration of his bodily self into timeless ideality as an end in itself. Melancholy poet that he was, Kierkegaard's understanding of the thorn in the flesh and the

penitential stance that it occasioned eventually itself became, as we have seen, the occasion for a different order of penitence, *viz.* the penitence of the ethical poet.

The ethical poet understands the poetical ideal to be a demanding task master, not a protected sanctuary. Once Kierkegaard became such a poet, he adopted a new pseudonym. Anti-Climacus wrote *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Training in Christianity*, and in these two books Kierkegaard admitted that the Christian ideal set forth by this pseudonym is one that he had not duplicated in his own life. »I am not that«, says Kierkegaard of the Christian ideal poetized by Anti-Climacus. This admission is a significant one, because it represents Kierkegaard's self-consciousness with respect to the double edged quality of the world of the pseudonyms. The admission that »I am not the ideal represented in these books« indicates Kierkegaard's determination not to allow himself the satisfaction of resting in the poetization of the ideal as he had done in his earlier pseudonymous writings. This admission guaranteed that the Christian ideal set forth by Anti-Climacus would not become the inward sanctuary of one who believed that art is better than life and would become, on the contrary, a demanding ideal that draws the individual from the stillness of his inward sanctuary into a journey in time.⁵⁰

1. For studies of Kierkegaard's melancholy, see Vincent McCarthy, *The Phenomenology of Moods* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), pp. 53-81; Marguerite Grimault's *La Melancholie de Kierkegaard* (Doris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1965); Ib Ostenfeld, *Søren Kierkegaard's Psychology*, trans. and ed. by Alastair McKinnon (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1978), pp. 1-7; and Ronald Grimsley, »Romantic Melancholy in Chateaubriand and Kierkegaard«, *Comparative Literature*, VIII (Summer, 1956), pp. 227-44.

2. Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna. H. Hong, 7 vols., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), VI, 6626, 6890.

3. *Ibid.*, V, 5431.

4. *Ibid.*, V, 5430.

5. *Ibid.*, V, 6132.

6. *Ibid.*, V, 6230.

7. Grimsley nicely captures this fact about Kierkegaard in his discussion of him and Chateaubriand. »The imagination of both writers is also similar in that it has an essentially effective basis; it does not – like the inventive imagination of a Balzac, a Dickens, or a Tolstoy – seek to create a living world that seems apart from the mind of its creator, but works upon complex emotions whose influence remains very discernible in their fictional characters. In both cases there is an indissoluble, if only indirect, link between the outlook of their main characters and the intimate psychic

life of the authors themselves«.

8. *JP* V, 6132.

9. *Ibid.*, VI, 6511.

10. *Ibid.*, VI, 6227.

11. *Ibid.*, V, 5648.

12. *Ibid.*, V, 5692.

13. *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, ed. by P. A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr, and E. Torsting, 20 vols. (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1909-48), VII A 27.

14. *JP* VI, 6415.

15. *Ibid.*, VI, 6227.

16. *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. Alexander Dru (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 1064.

17. Søren Kierkegaard, *On Authority and Revelation*, trans. by Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1966), p. 173.

18. *JP* V, 6135.

19. The apostle Paul mentions this term in relation to himself only once. See II Corinthians 12:7.

20. Søren Kierkegaard, *Edifying Discourses*, trans. by David F. Swenson and Lillian M. Swenson, 4 vols. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943-46), IV, 56-7.

21. *Ibid.*, IV, 56.

22. *Ibid.*, IV, 57.

23. *Ibid.*, IV, 59-60.

24. *Ibid.*, IV, 61.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, IV, 61-2.

27. *Ibid.*, IV, 62-3.

28. *Ibid.*, IV, 63.

29. *Ibid.*, IV, 70.
30. *JP*, VI, 6488.
31. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* trans. by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), II, 214.
32. Dru, *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, 613. See *JP*, V, 5947.
33. Ralph Harper, *The Seventh Solitude* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), p. 12.
34. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, XIX, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong in *Kierkegaard's Writings*, 25 Vols., ed. Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 77-78.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.
40. *JP*, VI, 6177.
41. *Ibid.*, VI, 6206.
42. *Ibid.*, VI, 6327.
43. *Ibid.*, VI, 6325.
44. *Ibid.*, VI, 6426.
45. *Ibid.*, VI, 6472:6 Cf., V, 6132.
46. *Ibid.*, VI, 6472:6.
47. *Ibid.*, VI, 6431.
48. *Ibid.*, VI, 6508.
49. *Ibid.*, VI, 6383.
50. »To me there is something inexplicably happy in the antithesis Climacus-Anti-Climacus, I recognize myself, and my nature so entirely in it that if someone else had discovered it I should have thought he had spied upon me«. Dru, *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, 1000. We should now understand how both pseudonyms reflect the two conflicting tendencies in Kierkegaard's nature. As I have indicated, my view is that in the final outcome the ethical poet won out over the melancholy poet; Kierkegaard ceased to write exclusively for himself and self-consciously took up his pen to write for his neighbor. This change from being a melancholy to an ethical poet occurred in the years between 1846 and 1848 when Kierkegaard duly worked out his theory of indirect communication and, quite acceptably re-interpreted his previous pseudonymous writings in these terms. In addition to the work of Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard also adopted a writing style under his own name that more directly addressed his reader for the purpose of cultivating the ethical-religious mode of existence. See pp. 249-303 of *Kierkegaard and Christendom* for my analysis of this change in his writing style.