

SOME VERSIONS OF THE AESTHETE:
KIERKEGAARD'S *EITHER/OR*¹

by Louis Mackey

Either/Or is the earliest of Kierkegaard's writings in the official canon of his "literature." The corpus as a whole is designed to coax its readers from their quotidian dullness into uneasy awareness of the ethical and religious dimensions of their freedom. To this end Kierkegaard proposed to meet his readers where they were; and where they were, he decided, was the *aesthetic* "stage on life's way." Therefore *Either/Or*, the first book of the series, presents *dramatic* a contrast between the aesthetic life—the life which the average man mostly lives—and the ethical life—a superior form of self-understanding.

It is a bit surprising to follow the peregrinations of Victor Eremita and his subalterns in volume I of *Either/Or*, and then to be told that this romantico-ironic Never-Never Land is the spiritual habitation of Everyman. Nevertheless, an analysis of *Either/Or* I sustains Kierkegaard's claim that the aesthetic way of life as there presented is the "existence-sphere" of the ordinary man—of man, as Kierkegaard would say, in his *immediacy*.

The word "immediacy" itself is a bit of jargon that Kierkegaard picked up from Hegel and the Hegelians. It would be tedious and pointless to pursue the technical meaning of this term in Hegel's system, but it is important to get the general sense of the word as a way into Kierkegaard's mind. It is common to equate *immediate* experience with *direct* experience, experience as it is *simply given* and *simply had* before the onset of reflection. Sensation and feeling are immediate as opposed to thought; first thoughts are immediate as opposed to second guesses; life as it is before it doubles back on itself in the "mediation" of self-consciousness is "immediate existence." If nature be opposed to the reflexive operations of freedom, then a man's immediacy is what he is "by nature."

Traditionally "aesthetic" has come to mean "pertaining to beauty and the fine arts," but in Kierkegaard it retains its etymological sense of *aisthesis*, "sense perception." He defines what he calls the "aesthetic"—as

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a dimension of existence and as an overall design for living—by means of the immediate. “The aesthetic in a man is that by which he immediately is what he is.”² If we could discover what human nature is, then we could catch ourselves in our immediacy, and we would understand what Kierkegaard means by the aesthetic.

But the difficulty with immediacy is that it never *is* where it is asked about. Asking about immediacy is already an act of reflection once removed from the immediate. Just as a man cannot look himself straight in the eye, so immediacy cannot be got at directly (*immediately*); it can only be divined as the prelapsarian origin mirrored but never substantially present in every condition of self-awareness. This alienation of the self from its immediacy infects the philosophical attempt to comprehend human nature categorially, but it is more arresting in the case of the man who tries to *be* his immediacy.

Kierkegaard’s “A” is such a man. The anonymous dilettante whose dilations fill *Either/Or* I, A is offered as a representative aesthetic personality. In view of the identity of the aesthetic with the immediate, one might expect him to be a sensual man, a man whose overriding aim is the direct satisfaction of his native wants. It is true that he lives for pleasure. And yet he is disenchanted enough to know that no human life is lived on the strength of impulse alone. No man can turn and live with animals, for the turning would imply a prior disengagement from the unconscious mass of beasthood. The placid and self-contained innocence of the brute is a dream of the poet, not the situation of man. True to the paradox of immediacy (that it never is where it is sought), desire and gratification are presented not as A’s life but as the chief *preoccupation* of his life.

A is a perfervid admirer of Mozart’s *Don Juan*. In his essay “The Immediate Stages of the Erotic or the Musical Erotic” he praises Mozart’s opera as a perfect work of art, “classic and immortal,” on the grounds that it realizes a total fusion of form and content.³ In *Don Juan*, as A hears it, the musical form is so happily and inseparably wedded to the passional content that together they body forth sexual desire in its immediacy. *Don Juan*’s sensuality is pure undifferentiated desire. He craves *woman*, wholesale and without discrimination of age or beauty: *pur chè porti la gonella, voi sapete quel chè fà*.⁴ His passion is a “force of nature,” unriven by reflection and undisturbed by moral misgivings. Mozart’s music is the artistic analogue of this passion, an aural energy not yet articulated into the intelligible forms of speech. There are words, of course, but their very absurdity (“one thousand and three in Spain . . .”) negates their significance as language and hurls them back into the floodtide of sound. In Mozart’s opera A finds *immediacy immediately presented*, the content

of immediacy interfusing and interfused by immediate form. In this exquisite alchemy art (reflection) *is* nature (the immediate).

Yet there is ambiguity in this achievement. *Don Juan is* after all *art*. It is to art that one must go if he wants to find the immediate given in its immediacy. Don Juan could never happen in real life: one thousand and three in Spain! Global sexuality—the eternal erection undrooping in the eternal orgasm—is a fictive biology of the heroes of imagination. Pure immediacy cannot be experienced as the content of an actual life; it can only be savored as fantasy.

This contradiction is implicitly recognized in A's analysis of *Don Juan*. He is fascinated by the Don because he is a pure type, and by the opera because it is the pure presentation of a pure type. Mozart's masterpiece is the embodiment of the most abstract idea (sensuality) in the most abstract medium (music). Sensuality is "abstraction" because, as immediate, it is not yet parcelled out into specific preferences for discreet objects (*pur ch e porti la gonella . . .*), and not yet constrained by moral necessity to accept the discipline of a part within an ordered whole. Sensuality *simpliciter* is only the abstract dynamic, the "exuberant joy," of life. Music is similarly abstract. Language—naming, defining, judging, and discoursing—is the spirit's vehicle for the tenor of the concrete. Music with its moving and interacting tonal patterns mimics the syntactic form of language but altogether lacks its semantic commitment: it is the abstract dynamic of spirit without the content of spirit.⁵ By A's logic of inversion, that which appears to be most concrete—sensuality and its expression—evaporates into the airiest of abstractions.

It is this logic that prompts A's genuflection in the presence of pure types purely enshrined in a pure medium. Men often voice a vague desire to enjoy life in all its forms and to experience everything. They are saying in their cruder way what A says with superior consistency: "I want to *be life*, not this life or that life, just vitality itself." But Kierkegaard's paradigmatic aesthete is also disenchanted by superior wisdom: he knows that this desire is unattainable. Too sophisticated to be a sensualist himself, he is reconciled to *admiring*, in its artful and only possible realization, that perfection which he cannot *be*.

The man (Kierkegaard is saying) who endeavors to live wholly out of nature, the man who wishes to be only what he immediately is, will, if he is honest, be driven by the logic of immediacy to the antithesis of immediacy: bootless enthusiasm for a beautiful but impossible ideal. The internal nexus joining "aesthetic" in its etymological sense to "aesthetic" in its traditional connotation is hereby exposed: art is the transfiguration of nature by self-consciousness.

But A is not done yet. He is too thorough a dialectician and too determined an aesthete to repose in admiration at the expense of enjoyment. If he cannot make immediacy his life, he will make life itself an art. This reversal takes place already in the essay on *Don Juan*. No sooner has A declared the essential abstractness of the opera and its theme than he turns around to deliver an encomium of the infinite richness of every work of art. In a passage reminiscent of Kant's doctrine of Aesthetical Ideas, he speculates: *because* the unity of form and content in a consummate work of art precludes any *definitive* critical analysis, the work is an inexhaustible vein from which infinite reflections can be mined. No understanding of the work is ever final; therefore the possibilities for understanding it are infinite. His rationale is quasi-Hegelian: because it is wholly abstract, immediacy is fecund with every possible concretion. That which lacks all determinacy is receptive to any and every determination. For if the most concrete, by reason of its density, is the most abstract, then the most abstract, by reason of its emptiness, is potentially the most concrete.

This turn in his theory of art offers A a way out of his personal impasse. The aesthete (etymological sense) wants pleasures; the aesthete (traditional connotation), knowing that he cannot have his pleasures by instinct, seeks to contrive them by craft. His immediacy becomes the infinitely pliable medium in which he fabricates his delights. He cannot attain to the condition of nature; he will therefore aspire to the condition of art. A's *diapsalmata* or "refrains," and his paper on "The Rotation Method," are ventures in the art of living.⁶ The aphorisms, directed *ad se ipsum*, are the fruits in his own person of the counsel advanced in his "essay in the theory of social prudence."

The burden of A's moods is clearly heard in these typical *diapsalmata*:

I do not care for anything. I do not care to ride, for the exercise is too violent. I do not care to walk, walking is too strenuous. I do not care to lie down, for I should either have to remain lying, and I do not care to do that, or I should have to get up again, and I do not care to do that either. *Summa summarum*: I do not care at all.⁷

Let others complain that the age is wicked; my complaint is that it is paltry; for it lacks passion. Men's thoughts are thin and flimsy like lace, they are themselves pitiable like the lacemakers. The thoughts of their hearts are too paltry to be sinful. For a worm it might be regarded as a sin to harbor such thoughts, but not for a being made in the image of God. Their lusts are dull and sluggish, their passions sleepy. They do their duty, these shopkeeping souls, but they clip the coin a trifle, like the Jews; they think that even if the Lord keeps ever so careful a set of books, they may still cheat Him a little. Out upon them! This is the reason my soul always turns back to the Old Testament and to Shakespeare. I feel that those who speak there are at least human beings: they hate, they love, they murder their enemies, and curse their descendants throughout all generations, they sin.⁸

The essence of pleasure does not lie in the thing enjoyed, but in the accom-

panying consciousness. If I had a humble spirit in my service who, when I asked for a glass of water, brought me the world's costliest wines blended in a chalice, I should dismiss him, in order to teach him that pleasure consists not in what I enjoy, but in having my own way.⁹

The last of these is the root and reconciliation of the first two. Prerequisite for the practice of any art is the absolute freedom of the artist. What the aesthete is after—the condition of all subsequent pleasure—is “having his own way.” On the one hand, then, he does not care to do anything; for anything he does puts him under the compulsion to do something else. At the same time he despises the paltry caution that short-changes its vices for the sake of higgled virtues; to balk at *les grandes passions* is to stop short of a full realization of one's possibilities. It is necessary both to enjoy everything and to care about nothing. The essence of freedom, aesthetically conceived, is to enjoy having one's own way, or by simple substitution, enjoying oneself enjoying oneself. Desire and enjoyment are only free if they are indifferent to what is desired and enjoyed. One must want without needing and enjoy without being gratified.

In an “ecstatic lecture” A defines the “sum and substance of all philosophy” in a series of monotonous dilemmas: if you marry, you will regret it, and if you do not marry, you will regret that; if you trust a woman, you will regret it, and if you do not trust a woman, you will regret that; hang yourself and you will regret it, don't hang yourself and you will likewise regret that, *ad infinitum*. Either/or: for any x, either you do x or you do not do x, and in any case you will be sorry. Therefore—and this is the wisdom by which A consoles himself—: neither/nor. Every decision and every action entail regret for the alternate possibility concurrently and irrevocably renounced. Therefore, one should so live *aeterno modo* that he abrogates the law of contradiction in advance by—doing nothing. No decisions, no regrets; no actions, no consequences. The path to free self-enjoyment is the way of *dolce far niente*.¹⁰

But the sweet life of aesthetic indolence calls for the most delicate management. One cannot, for example, *resolutely* do nothing and survive the resolution unscathed. To do nothing in an affirmative way is just as constraining as doing something: if you do something, you will regret it, and if you do nothing, you will regret that. Strictly speaking, one should not even do nothing. But this is also, strictly speaking, impossible; like it or not, one will either ride or walk, lie down or stand up. Some practical expedients are required.

One course that recommends itself is romantic frenzy: let yourself go. Since it is really a matter of indifference what a man does, then anything he goes at is fine and beautiful if he does it with total abandon. But the romantic is a very poor counsellor. Wiser by an eternity, A knows that if

he lets himself go, he will *certainly* regret that. The secret of enjoyment is neither to do nothing nor to do anything with all one's might. The secret is to do *everything* in such a way that one rigorously *avoids all commitments*. The art of living is neither an impossible self-denial nor a prodigal self-squandering, but the most fastidious self-discipline.

Self-discipline as a technique for maximizing pleasure and minimizing boredom: this is the prescription of A's disquisition on the rotation-method. The artful hedonist rotates his pleasures as the farmer rotates his crops. To this end he must be prepared to allow any or all of his desires to lie fallow at any time. The first precept of this strangely skewed asceticism is the counsel of despair: *nil admirari*. "It is impossible to live artistically before one has made up one's mind to abandon hope; for hope precludes self-limitation."¹¹ Hope exposes the hopeful to the possibility of frustration; therefore walk circumspectly that you may forget the unsettling at will and redeem the tedious with recollection. The art of recollection—the imaginative revision of a delightful past—and the art of forgetting—the sidestep by which one diverts himself from the path of a disgruntling present—together compose the dear desperation that shields the aesthete forever (*aeterno modo*) from the threat of the future.

One who has perfected himself in the twin arts of remembering and forgetting is in a position to play at battledore and shuttlecock with the whole of existence. . . . The art of remembering and forgetting will also insure against sticking fast in some relationship of life, and make possible the realization of a complete freedom.¹²

From this synderesis follow the particular maxims of aesthetic praxis: take fullest advantage of people, but beware the obligations of friendship; enjoy love, but shun marriage; cultivate the arts, but see that you reap no profit therefrom. Whatever the situation, stay in control. Now there is only one way a man can stay in control of every situation, and that is by first assuming complete control of himself. He cannot produce at will the events and environs of his life; he cannot even create his own moods. But he can determine the *meaning* these circumstances will have for him by the practice of systematic *arbitrariness*.¹³ Suppose, for example, he goes to church (no experienced aesthete would neglect the charming possibilities offered by the practice of religion): he will so attend to the sermon that he refuses the pastoral edification in order to beatify himself with observations of the pastoral Adam's apple. In an erotic *pas de deux* he will be the curious *voyeur* of his own athletic love-making. By seizing the occasion and turning it to capricious ends, he makes and unmakes his situation as it pleases him. He is at once the donor and the recipient of his delights. By his hopeless withdrawal from immediacy he perfects his freedom; by his arbitrary return to immediacy he keeps his independence and simul-

taneously gives his life content. The varied round of pleasures is enabled by the larger "rotation method," the dialectical circle of withdrawal and return.

Thus the pattern of A's life duplicates the structure of *Don Juan*. As in the aesthetic unity of the opera the most vacuous abstraction is by implication the most teeming concretion, so in the aesthetic unity of A's existence the kenosis implied in his *nil admirari* is the emancipation by which he releases himself for the arbitrary pursuit of every pleasure. The practical dilemma of the hedonist is resolved in the light of the art theorist's analysis of immediacy. However circuitous the route, A comes at last to the land of heart's desire.

Yet the solution is suspect, if for no other reason than at least because it does not match A's character as this is delineated in *Either/Or* I. In spite of his asseverations in "The Rotation Method," his life is no carrousel of joys; he is not just an exceptionally refined playboy. The discussion so far, intent on the rationale by which A orders and justifies his life, has overlooked several important aspects of the life itself. It has ignored, for example, the heavy sadness that palls the *diapsalmata*, and the fascination with death and dereliction in essays like "Shadowgraphs,"¹⁴ "The Ancient Tragical Motif as Reflected in the Modern,"¹⁵ and "The Unhappiest Man."¹⁶ In particular it has said nothing of A's membership in that nocturnal society synthetically and lugubriously named *symparanekromenoi*, the "fellowship of the deceased." These are strange themes and strange predilections for a hedonist, and yet they follow irresistibly from the aesthetic presupposition that life consists in enjoyment: "There are well-known insects which die in the moment of fecundation. So it is with all joy; life's supreme and richest moment of pleasure is coupled with death."¹⁷ The familiar connection between sexual consummation and death—a standard pun in the English of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—is the more obvious consequence of a less obvious but more intimate and fundamental conjunction of death and delight.

"Death," says A, addressing the *symparanekromenoi*, "is for us the greatest happiness."¹⁸ In his lecture on "The Ancient Tragical Motif," subtitled "an essay in the fragmentary," he outlines the metaphysical and artistic tenets held by the brotherhood of defunct men. Reality, in their view, is a show of accidental events, of which the only thing one can confidently say is: it passes. Reality is essentially *pastness*. But it is a pastness without finality or fulfilment: reality is as desultory as it is fleeting. That which is past without being perfected is dead. Reality aesthetically conceived is death.

Theory of art follows ontology. The literati of the *symparanekromenoi* are dedicated to the production of works marked by a "gleaming transi-

toriness." Their essays are "anacoluthic," "fragmentary pursuits"; or as A finally sums it up, "Let us then describe our purpose as an attempt . . . in the art of writing posthumous papers."¹⁹ Since for these aesthetes art is not distinct from life, their art of living is an imaginative dying before their death. The fellowship of the deceased is made up of those who have chosen death as a way of life. "The unhappiest man" in the world is the man who absents himself from experience, whose hope and whose memory are equally vain, because his future is already past in anticipation and his past forever imminent in recollection. A man without a present, his life a possibility never tried and never to be overtaken, but ever cherished, he is embalmed before his birth. "But what do I say: the unhappiest, the happiest I ought to say, for this is indeed a gift of the gods which no one can give himself."²⁰ The unhappiest man, and paradoxically the happiest, the man whose life is death, is the aesthete himself. Whence the *symparane-kromenoi*, for whom death is the greatest happiness.

The paradox is illumined by a recapitulation of the aesthetic project and its execution. The aesthete wants enjoyment, but enjoyment cannot simply be had, it must be arranged. Life must be made an art, but the art of living requires a total detachment from everything merely given and possibly unpleasant, as well as a disinterested arbitrariness in the concoction of actual pleasures. The perennial threat to this insouciance is misfortune, and the supreme misfortune is death. Fate, in its double role of chance and necessity, and especially death, inevitable in its outcome but inconstant in its choice of time and place and manner, seem to constitute the absolute frustration of aesthetic freedom. The one gift that cannot be refused is death. Suicide will not work: its apparent defiance is really capitulation. The aesthete could not consistently kill himself unless he could survive to enjoy the event.

Two consequences follow: first, the aesthete worships fate. In the *ultimatum* of death it sets the outer limit to his *nil admirari* and his caprice; it is the one power he cannot transcend or overwhelm. A's devotion to tragic literature is the offering he lays on the altar of his god. But (and this is the second consequence) the tragic corpus itself is the divine liturgy in which death is transubstantiated to art. In the celebration of this liturgy the aesthete receives the bread and wine of his own communion with life. The holy mystery of aestheticism is that everything—even misfortune and death—can be enjoyed. In possibility, Kierkegaard liked to say, everything is possible. In the grace of this possibility the aesthete consumes his god and enters into his beatitude.

But it must not be forgotten that this is a black mass. The aesthete's communion is a foretaste of death. His beatitude—prefigured already in his initial retreat from life and now perfected in his tragic necrolatry—is

melancholy. Melancholy is the ultimate and only consistent form of aesthetic enjoyment. Over the entrance to the aesthetic life burn the prophetic words: *lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate*.²¹ The art of living is the art of enjoying despair. It is not surprising, then, to find among A's aphorisms passages like these:

I say of my sorrow what the Englishman says of his house: my sorrow is my castle.²²

My life is like an eternal night; when at last I die, then I can say with Achilles: *Du bist vollbracht, Nachtwache meines Daseyns*.²³

Not the slightest statue but requires for its beauty the scarring of a mountain; what wonder that the art of life demands the forsaking of a world. Not *Weltschmerz* but a *schmerzlich Weltlösigkeit*, not world-weariness but a weary worldlessness, are the melancholy outcome of A's assault on immediacy.

But if the prospect is dreary, the achievement is magnificent. A is unequivocally intent on living aesthetically, and he accepts the consequences of his project with matchless consistency. To say that he is effete is no refutation: he embraces his vanity with the enthusiasm of despair. To complain that he is gloomy is beside the point: he savors the wormwood and the gall with bittersweet relish. Seen from inside his skin, any protest against his way of life—in the interests of sanity, sound sense, morals, or piety—is bound to seem philistine. He is, to give him his proper name, the *poet* par excellence. His medium is not words, but himself: he is the living *poiesis*, the root and branch of which all merely verbal making is but the flower.

Unlike Don Juan, who must vanish when the house lights go up, A might really exist, does in fact exist as the father of us all. Like most men most of the time and all men some of the time, he seeks (but with exemplary single-mindedness) the richest satisfaction of desire compatible with the widest exercise of freedom. That this involves him in paradox is a fact he sees and welcomes, because he is more honest and more thorough than the rest of us. His life is the indefatigable process of reconciling its own contradictions. Each stage of the Hegelian dialectic is driven by its inner contradictions into another and higher stage. In the Kierkegaardian dialectic, each of the "stages on life's way" contains its contradictions—is, in fact, the *project* of so containing them. While the typical Hegelian protagonist is the abstraction of an abstraction ("master" and "slave"), the Kierkegaardian "existence-spheres" come to focus in *dramatis personae* who struggle to assimilate their problems into the abiding integrity of their individual personalities.

A then is a real man, or, as he is ensconced in his literary productions, an "existential possibility." The excellence of his poetic achievement is

validated by the cogency of his *modus vivendi*: he exists his poetry and poetizes his existence. To call him "aesthete" is to acknowledge the hypostatic union of immediacy and freedom where art is incarnate in life and life is redeemed in art.

At the end of the first volume of *Either/Or*, hard on the heels of "The Rotation Method" and balancing in bulk the long essay on *Don Juan* with which the book opens, stands the "Diary of the Seducer."²⁴ Apparently alien to the rest of the book—allegedly found among the papers of A, who in turn claims to have copied it out on the sly, it purports to be the private journals of one Johannes nicknamed "the seducer"—the Diary is also somewhat deceptive. It is indeed the record of a seduction, but any pornographic expectations raised by the title are laid in the perusal. The carnal climax occurs in the interval between the ultimate and penultimate entries, while the remaining 140-odd pages detail the intricate procedure by which the seduction is accomplished. Having sighted and fancied Cordelia Wahl, Johannes determines upon her undoing, lays his snares, and takes his prey. Once he has her he immediately releases her (having introduced her, as he puts it, into a "higher sphere" of consciousness),²⁵ for her interest is gone with her maidenhood.

More interesting than the story itself is Johannes' theory of seduction and the techniques by which the theory is implemented. Seduction, as Johannes understands it, is not the act of defloration, nor does it presuppose an excessive concern with sex. To seduce a woman means: with no force but with much art to secure the free capitulation of her mind to yours. That sexuality will be the normal context for such an enterprise is obvious; but it is strictly incidental to the real objective, which is the conquest of the spirit and not the congress of the flesh. It is difficult but not impossible to imagine Johannes a eunuch. When a woman has acknowledged herself captivated, be her body never so intact, she is possessed more effectively than if she were captured by rape.

The character and the escapades of Johannes the Seducer suggest a comparison with Don Juan. The Don is sensuality pure and simple, to the exclusion of intellect. He is no more a seducer than is the force that through the green fuse drives the flower. Johannes is an intellect that can become sensual at will: "He lived far too intellectually to be a seducer in the common understanding of the word. Sometimes, however, he assumed a parastatic body, and was then sheer sensuality."²⁶ *Pur chè porti la gonella, voi sapete quel chè fà* describes the amorphous longings of Don Juan; the Seducer's more discriminating desire is presaged in the motto of his Diary, *Sua passion' predominante è la giovin principiante*.²⁷ The texts are from the same libretto, and it is not surprising to find A, in his commentary on *Don Juan*, imagining another kind of seducer, a seducer

who will enjoy not the satisfaction of desire, but the "deception," the "cunning," the "how, the method"²⁸ of seduction. Johannes is this "reflective Don Juan,"²⁹ whose pleasure is the seducing and not the rewards of seduction. Don Juan wants women, and for his purposes they are all sisters. His Teutonic namesake wants the excitement of a contest of minds, and for this end he needs a very particular woman: *la giovin principiante*, old enough to have a mind of her own, woman enough to want to give it away, and young enough to be unscarred by previous combats.

Johannes is after Cordelia's mind and the thrill of beguiling it. As he is scrupulous in his choice of victims, so he is ingenious in the selection and use of his weapons. He brings to his task resources of cunning, psychological insight, and patience—especially patience; Cordelia is five months in the making—that would tax and tire the ordinary sensualist. He shifts his moods in Cordelia's presence with calculated randomness: bewilderment begets attraction. He drones for hours with her old aunt about the high price of butter: boredom gives franchise to erotic fancy. He arranges to have her courted by an obliging boor: contempt of Edward becomes a bond that ties Cordelia to Johannes. He is betrothed to Cordelia, and promptly breaks the engagement: transferred from public trust to clandestine adventure, her desire burns sweeter and stronger. Whatever his tactics, Johannes never makes a move to seduce, and by that fact is made more seductive. His strategy, consistent with his theory of seduction, is to make himself an object at once terrifying and fascinating, *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. He makes himself—to adduce what Kierkegaard sometimes calls *the aesthetic category*—*interesting*. Bewitched at last, Cordelia throws herself into his arms, unable any longer to deny him the love he has evoked but never demanded. When she finally succumbs, it is not clear to her just who has done what and to whom. It is almost, in retrospect, as if she had seduced him. And this, of course, is exactly the effect Johannes has wanted and so faultlessly prepared: that his desire should become hers, that she should freely but helplessly surrender herself to her destroyer.

His journal gives us primarily Johannes' view of Johannes, and from within he looks very much like A. He is, by his own admission, a poet. Seduction is a kind of *poiesis* worked in the medium of woman's sexuality. If Johannes is careless of Cordelia and her feelings, it is only because he is so painstakingly careful of his artistry. He is faithless with Cordelia the girl, but only because of a higher fidelity to Cordelia "the Idea," who is privileged to be immortalized in his art. His pact is with the aesthetic, and that involves, as the case of A has already shown, detachment and arbitrariness in relation to actual persons and events. All love—poetically viewed—is essentially faithless.³⁰

Johannes could if he wished offer justification for his practice, though he is far too pure an aesthete to defend himself morally. The qualities by which he seduces girls are just those qualities of tact, diplomacy, and skill in the handling of people which are universally honored among men of affairs. If from a certain perspective he seems cold, cruel, inhumane, it is only because he does successfully what most men mostly bungle; he uses people exclusively for his own ends. If it be objected that he has after all deceived Cordelia, he can reply: Yes, but for her own good; I found her a girl, I left her a woman. She is not ruined by her seduction, but made; she has become for the first time free, self-conscious, and mature. Her husband—if she finds one—will be indebted to Johannes for his services. The seducer, by norms and devices commonly approved, but with much greater expertness in the application, is the benefactor of mankind.

Cordelia, however, is differently impressed. Her letters (four of them are incorporated in Johannes' *Diary*)³¹ speak alternately confusion, outraged innocence, pathos, self-pity, and—preeminently—horror. She shudders at the awareness that she has been possessed by a demon, she has made love to a "parastatic" body! Her lover dwells in splendid and terrible isolation in a phantom realm behind the real world. In the whimsicality of his moods he appears suddenly out of nowhere and as quickly vanishes again, so that Cordelia has often found herself "embracing a cloud."³² Because he willed to be her god, Johannes has become her devil. The aesthetic integrity of his personality is, from Cordelia's point of view, the dreadful vacuity of one who does not *practice* deception but *is* deceit itself. Johannes is betrayal as a way of life; his fidelity in the "service of the Idea" necessitates in principle a renunciation of every real relationship. He declares to the world—and to Cordelia in the very act of making love to her—"What have I to do with thee?"³³

That Cordelia should feel this way about her experience is hardly astounding. More important is the fact that A himself is aghast at Johannes. The account of his transcription of the *Diary* begins in Gothic mystery ("I cannot conceal from myself, scarcely can I master the anxiety which grips me at this moment . . ."),³⁴ moves to the realization that Johannes is a "depraved personality,"³⁵ and concludes to a prediction of derangement. A, who is a confidant of Cordelia and sees the desolation of her virginity, prophesies that Johannes will eventually outsmart himself:

As he has led others astray, so he ends, I think, by going astray himself. . . . He who goes astray inwardly . . . soon discovers that he is going about in a circle from which he cannot escape. I think it will be this way with him later, to a still more terrible extent. I can imagine nothing more excruciating than an intriguing mind, which has lost the thread of its continuity and now turns its whole acumen against itself, when conscience awakens and compels the schemer to extricate himself from this confusion.³⁶

Strange to hear A speaking of conscience, and ominous that he does so only in the presence of Johannes the Seducer. He confesses that he is

never quite able to control the anxiety that grips me every time I think about the case. I, too, am carried away into that nebulous realm, that dream world, where every moment one is afraid of his own shadow. Often I seek in vain to tear myself away; I follow along like a menacing shadow, an accuser who is mute. How strange! He has spread the deepest secrecy over everything, and yet there is an even deeper secret, and that is the fact that I am privy to it. . . . There is really nothing else which involves so much seduction and so great a curse as a secret.³⁷

A man who wills mystification as an end may wind up caught in the springs and elastics and false bottoms of his own legerdemain; the secrecy that is a condition of seduction may become a solitary confinement in which the seducer goes mad for want of another against whom he can rectify his wild imaginings.

Yet it is not Johannes who is on the brink of madness, but A; it is not Johannes in whom conscience starts with a cry of pain, but A. Of Johannes, A says:

Conscience exists for him only as a higher degree of consciousness, which expresses itself in a disquietude that does not, in a more profound sense, accuse him, but which keeps him awake, and gives him no rest in his barren activity. Nor is he mad; for the multitude of finite thoughts are not petrified in the eternity of madness.³⁸

Not Johannes' secret life, but A's privy involvement in *l'affaire Cordelia*—as an observer tranced in fascinated terror—is the beginning of insanity. *Johannes is the omen of madness and the awakening of conscience in A.*

Johannes sees himself as an artist, a poetizer of girls. To Cordelia he is an incubus with whom she has lain to her soul's damnation. For A Johannes is just *himself looked at from without*. The demonia of the seducer is the melancholy innocence of the aesthete seen from the other side, the side of his relations to other people with whom, willy nilly, he is involved, and whom, willy nilly, he draws into the vortex of his own confusion. A, who knows both Johannes and Cordelia, is granted this double recognition of himself and the awful wisdom it brings: the wisdom of fear and of a conscience born in fear.

But the intimacy between A and Johannes goes even deeper. In the general preface to *Either/Or* Victor Eremita, the pseudonymous editor, argues his conviction that A is the author, and not as he claims the pilferer, of the "Diary of the Seducer." For

the dominant mood in A's preface in a manner betrays the poet. It seems as if A had actually become afraid of his poem, as if it continued to terrify him, like a troubled dream when it is told. If it were an actual occurrence which he had become privy to, then it seems strange that the preface shows no trace of A's joy in seeing the realization of the idea which had so often floated before his

mind. . . . [The reference is to the reflective seducer imagined in the essay on *Don Juan*.] I find no trace of such a joy in the preface, but rather, as was said, a certain horror and trembling, which might well have its cause in his poetical relationship to this idea.³⁹

The suggestion that Johannes is a possibility projected by A is confirmed by the latter's remark that the Diary is a "poetic reproduction" of experience, and "therefore neither historically exact nor simply fiction, not indicative but subjunctive."⁴⁰ It is written in the mood of "as if," the mood of contrary-to-fact; Johannes looks so much like A because he is only a poetic elongation of A's personality. The madness and the moral upheaval on which he is verging are but the unfolding of possibilities already latent in A himself. In the Diary of the Seducer A has imaginatively pushed his way of life beyond its extreme limit, and he is appalled when he sees where it is leading him.

But Johannes is a *persona*, not a person. Just as pure sensuality (Don Juan) is possible only in art, so also is pure reflection (Johannes the Seducer). In *Don Juan* the unity of form and content is perfect because the distinction between them has not yet been drawn. In the journals of Johannes (the ghostly lover who assumes on occasion a parastatic body) the separation between nature and freedom is so complete that it can never be healed. It is no accident that Don Juan and the Seducer have names—indeed the same name—univocal names appropriate to pure types, whereas A is as anonymous and equivocal as immediacy itself. For neither Don Juan nor Johannes is a possibility that can be actualized. They are, rather, the ideal *terminus a quo* and the equally ideal *terminus ad quem* of the aesthetic life, which A alone and ambiguously *lives*. In *Don Juan* art is impossibly submerged in life; in Johannes life is impossibly lost for the sake of art. Inspired to enthusiasm by the one, recoiling in dread from the other, the aesthete strikes between them the precarious unhappy equilibrium of his own life in art. His existence is such stuff as dreams—bad dreams—are made of, and his little life is rounded with the sleep of unconscious nature. But that is merely to say that he is man—man as he immediately, aesthetically *is*, haunted by memories of bestial innocence and nightmares of demonic experience, melancholy in the assumption of his uncertain destiny.

And that, of course, is the point. The aesthete is simply man as he is by nature, albeit with a purity and a potency not commonly encountered. The aesthetic "stage on life's way" is just human nature. But that nature is not in *Either/Or* described, defined, or made the subject of Kierkegaard's opining; it is not (naturalistically) frozen into a stony objectivity from which no *man* could ever emerge. It is dramatically distanced by Kierkegaard's system of pseudonyms, poetically detached from Kierkegaard's mind and personality; human nature is possibility (freedom), and in the

Kierkegaardian literature human possibilities are sprung and set into a work of words (*poiema*) that explodes with a shock of recognition for its readers.

Kierkegaard's "philosophy," which is a ponderous ironic epigram over every existential philosophy, is that life cannot be defined without falsification. For every definition is a determination; but men are free, and their immediacy (human nature) is only the makings from which they must fashion their own selves. The *proton pseudon* in every philosophy—whether essentialist or existentialist—is the assumption that man can be defined. Kierkegaard's celebrated "definition" of man—"The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self; or it is *that in* the relation, that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation, but *that* the relation relates itself to its own self"⁴¹—is a parody on every such attempt at definition. The paradox it arranges in Hegelian gobbledygook is the spitting image of that everlasting equivocator who is the aesthete of *Either/Or*. Not the least of the methodological advantages of Kierkegaard's "poetry of inwardness" is its ability to delineate human nature in such a way that man's freedom is not systematically suppressed, but artfully released and made available for the responsibilities of ethical decision and the trial of religious faith.

Significantly, it is to A the man, not to Don Juan the myth or Johannes the menace, that the moralist of *Either/Or* II addresses his solemn admonitions.

NOTES

1. This paper is taken, with slight revisions, from a chapter on Søren Kierkegaard which will appear in a book on existential philosophy to be edited by George A. Schrader and published by McGraw-Hill Company.
2. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1944, and Doubleday Anchor Books, Garden City, New York, 1959, Vol. II, p. 182. I refer here and throughout to the paperback reprint, which is a revised translation.
3. *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 45-134, esp. p. 47. In A's interpretation of *Don Giovanni* the Commandante is not part of the unity of the opera, but a voice of divine judgment morally shattering this unity *ab extra*.
4. From the libretto of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. "If only she wears a petticoat, you know what he does."
5. Kierkegaard, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 52-55, 63-72, 100.
6. *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 17-42, 279-296.
7. *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 19-20.
8. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 27.
9. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 30.
10. *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 37-39.
11. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 288.
12. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 291.
13. *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 295-296.

14. *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 163-213.
15. *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 135-162.
16. *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 215-228.
17. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 20.
18. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 165.
19. *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 149-151, esp. p. 150.
20. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 228.
21. Dante, *Inferno*, III, 9. "All hope abandon, ye who enter here."
22. Kierkegaard, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 21.
23. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 35.
24. *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 297-440.
25. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 432.
26. *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 303-304.
27. Again from *Don Giovanni*. "His ruling passion is the fresh young girl." Cf. Kierkegaard, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 298.
28. *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 107, 98.
29. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 107.
30. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 432.
31. *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 305-306, 308-309.
32. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 305.
33. Cf. Matthew 8: 28ff.
34. Kierkegaard, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 299.
35. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 299.
36. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 304.
37. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 306.
38. *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 304-305.
39. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 9.
40. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 300.
41. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness Unto Death*, Doubleday Anchor Books, Garden City, New York, 1954, p. 146, adapted.