

Away from the Poet!

Ralph McNerny

In the posthumously published retrospect, *The Point of View*, Kierkegaard provides us with a way of looking at his pseudonymous publications that might easily have escaped the contemporary reader of them. Of course Kierkegaard did not want the key provided before the presence of a lock was noticed. Indeed, the provision of the key has not always convinced his later readers that there is any need for one.

In this paper, I shall proceed on the assumption that Kierkegaard's thoughts about the pseudonymous writings are as authoritative as any we are likely to get and that what he says about the works of especial interest to our conference is worth reflecting on.

Kierkegaard's insistence that he was from first to last a religious writer may strike us as he feared it would — a late conversion, the remorse of the bestseller, not unlike Chaucer's apology for the *Canterbury Tales*, whose earthiness, he feared, might have provided an occasion of sin. It is not impossible to imagine a prurient reader of the first volume of *Either Or*. After all, "The Diary of the Seducer" was published separately in French, perhaps destined for those book stalls along the Seine. But Kierkegaard's insistence is not repudiation but interpretation.

If we take Kierkegaard's self-description seriously, the telos of the whole literary production is to show what it means to be a Christian. Since he is writing to nominal Christians, we might think that he is preaching to the choir. Not quite. The underlying assumption is that Christians are capable of innumerable ways of misunderstanding the task that is theirs. Moreover, —this is

crucial— he is not out to counter misunderstanding on the level of argument. Urging, for example, that you think being a Christian is such-and-such but you are mistaken since it is actually this-and-that. The aim of the literature is not to win an argument, but to provide an occasion for conversion.

Among other things, this aim makes it impossible to assess the effectiveness of the literature. The locus of its effect, one way or another, is *in foro interno*.

That being understood, Kierkegaard tells us that the pseudonymous literature describes two movements, two *termini a quibus* to the single *terminus ad quem*: what it means to be a Christian. One of those movements, "Away from philosophy!" is confined to two works and one pseudonymous author, Johannes Climacus, the author of *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*. Here, philosophical argument is the means of effecting the desired result and the indirect method is at its most subtle since the reader must allow abstract argument to self-destruct.

1. *The Sensuous-Erotic Genius*

The movement "Away from the poet!" is represented by a number of pseudonymous authors and works. Indeed, the first volume of *Either/Or*, to which this paper is restricted, is an anthology of pseudonymous writers under the editorship of Victor Eremita. My theme is the analysis of sensuousness, of the aesthetic, of the poetic as a possible mode of existence which is ruled out by Christianity. First, I shall try to lay out my understanding of this "first sphere." Then I will compare it with standard ethical and religious critiques of a life lived for pleasure.

I shall end with the later Kierkegaardian claim that an aesthetic or poetic life is a life of despair.

“Are passions, then, the pagans of the soul? Reason alone baptized?” These words, quoted from the English poet Young, provide the motto of volume one of *Either/Or*. The opening section, the Diapsalmata give a series of brief passages, short paragraphs in the main, which convey the shifting moods of a young man. It is as if an attempt is being made to let the passions speak, to let them fluctuate before us, with their wild elations followed by plunging depression, an uncontrolled vacillation.

There follows the lengthy essay—in length it is equal to a short book—“The Immediate Stages of the Erotic or The Musical Erotic.” Why is the author so enthralled by Mozart's *Don Giovanni*? The question leads to a discussion of the criteria according to which we rank works of art, and one possibility is on the basis of content, subject matter, as opposed to form. The author explores both and ends with the conviction that the attempt to divorce form from content is unpromising. There emerges a definition of a classic. “Only when the idea reposes with transparent clearness in a definite form, can it be called a classical work; but then it will also be able to withstand the attacks of time.” (p. 52)

It when he turns to a discussion of the uniqueness of the classical work, the unlikelihood that it could be repeated, that we find the striking claim that “the more abstract and hence more void of content the idea is, and the more abstract and hence the more poverty stricken the medium is, the greater probability that when the idea has once obtained its expression, then it has found it once for all.” (pp. 52-3) What makes an idea concrete? Being permeated with the historical consciousness.

But what does it mean to say that the medium is concrete, other than to say it is language, or

is seen in approximation to language; for language is the most concrete of all media. (53)

He thus owes us an account of the most abstract idea as well as the most abstract medium. "The most abstract medium is the one furthest removed from language." (54) On this basis, the media employed in architecture and sculpture and painting and music are abstract. "The most abstract idea conceivable is sensuous genius." (55) But this most abstract idea is expressible in only one medium, music. "The fact that it exists in a succession of moments expresses its epic character, but still it is not epic in the strict sense, for it has not yet advanced to words, but moves always in immediacy. Hence it cannot be represented in poetry. The only medium that can express it is music. Music has, namely, an element of time in itself, but it does not take place in time except in an unessential sense."

Even uncompressed as I have presented them, the argument of these pages is dense. They are, in my view, among the most interesting pages Kierkegaard wrote, any anyone in doubt of the range and depth of his genius need only browse through this first volume of *Either/Or*. The argument we have been following comes to its desired conclusion. "The perfect unity of this idea [sensuous genius] and the corresponding form we have in Mozart's *Don Juan*." (55)

Sensuous genius, the erotic, the musical erotic, sensuousness — these point to something that was brought into the world with Christianity. By positing one thing, what it is, Christianity posits what it excludes, and what it excludes is sensuousness. We have, then, within the essay on the Immediate Stages of the Erotic, an indication of how what is being talked of relates to Christianity. It is its opposite. "As principle, as power, as a self-contained system, sensuousness is first posited in Christianity; and in that sense it is true that Christianity brought sensuousness into the

world.” (59) “If I now imagine the sensuous-erotic as a principle, as a power, as a kingdom qualified spiritually, that is to say, so qualified that the spirit excludes it; if I imagine this principle concentrated in a single individual, then I have the concept of sensuous-erotic genius.” (62) The sensuous-erotic genius can only be expressed in its immediacy in music.

Although music is called a language, the essay stresses the distance between music and language. Language is, so to speak, music with meaning, sound with signification, it is qualified by the spiritual, by what it means. Here the essay provides us with an interesting view of language as a spectrum bounded at either end by music. If we take prosaic language, meaning dominates while the music and rhythm and quantity of the articulated sound is suppressed so that we are unaware of it. In the oratorical use, however, “the sonorous structure of its periods, a hint of the musical” is heard, while in poetic form “in the structure of the verse, in the rhyme” the musical dimension of language is at equal to the meaning dimension — “until at last the musical has been developed so strongly that language ceases and everything becomes music.” (67) At the opposite end of the spectrum, we descend into the prelinguistic babble of the child, music of a sort, at least to the maternal ear.

All this and more is preliminary to the essay's pointing to Don Juan as the sensuous-erotic genius who has found classic expression in Mozart's opera. Don Juan is the seducer *par excellence*, a force, elemental, mindless, voracious. Leporello keeps count of the endlessly repetitive act — “One thousand three in Spain alone!”

But let me bring this account to a stop, concluding with the observation that Johannes, of “Diary of the Seducer,” is the ultimate expression of the aesthetic, of that sphere which, in volume one of *Either/Or*, extends from the innocent Diapsalmata through progressively less ambiguous expressions of the

sensuous, reaching a kind of culmination in *Don Giovanni*, but achieving its ultimate expression in the cold mindful seducer of the diary.

2. *The Greeks and the Sensuous*

We know, as Kierkegaard's contemporary reader of the pseudonymous literature will come to know, that the aesthetic is a sphere which gives way in volume two to the ethical, which in turn is surpassed by the religious and ultimately by Christianity. We are reminded that the sensuous is in a sense posited by Christianity, in the sense that it is a mode of existence that is excluded by Christianity. Within volume one, it is treated merely as a matter of fact that Christianity takes this attitude toward the sensuous. Insofar as a reason for the exclusion of the sensuous is understood, it would seem to be a reason which is effective *within* Christianity. From the point of view of the sensuous-erotic, one might equally well say that Christianity is excluded.

A second point. Sensuousness exists prior to Christianity, but not as spiritually determined, that is, excluded as a rival form of life. The essay takes a somewhat benign view of the role of the sensuous in the Greek outlook. This is disingenuous. To think of Plato, to think of Aristotle, is to think of arguments to the effect that a life lived for pleasure cannot bring human happiness. Recall the structure of Aristotle's argument.

In isolating the nature of human happiness, Aristotle employs the *ergon* or function analysis. The worth of any artifact is grounded in how well or badly it performs the function for which it was made. An automobile is not said to be a good one because it can provide cover for a rifleman in an urban skirmish. A hammer is not a good hammer because it can be used as a

doorstop or paperweight. An artifact is good or bad as such, *per se*, insofar as it fulfills its proper function.

In applying the function analysis to man, Aristotle rather quickly dismisses the possibility that a life lived for pleasure could be constitutive of human happiness. True, the many, the *hoi polloi*, pursue pleasure as if it were beatifying, but they are wrong. Why? Because pleasure as it is usually understood, as it is understood by the *hoi polloi*, accompanies activities like eating and drinking, also sexual activity, but none of these activities are peculiar or proper to men; they are found in brute animals as well. Thus, to do them well, cannot be the specifically human good.

It is not of course that such activities and their ends and goods do not enter into the account of the complete human good. Moral virtue consists precisely in the humanizing of such activities and the passions and emotions associated with them. Moderation or *sophrosyne* is had when sense appetite responds to the judgment of reason as to how the object of sense and the pleasure corresponding to sense activity contribute to the complete human good. Are passions then the pagans of the soul? No, in the human agent, they are meant to come under the integrating direction of reason.

In the *Protagoras*, Plato will speak of the inappropriateness of reason being dragged around by something less than itself, namely, the emotions. Like Aristotle, he has a hierarchical view of the activities which enter into the human agent. Some egalitarians quarrel with this, as if it were merely an arbitrary matter to hold that the activity of mind is more perfect than the activity of the senses. But of course Aristotle and Plato have good reasons for the hierarchical ordering of the powers and activities of the human agent.

3. *The Argument from Despair*

Very well. Here now is the question I want to pose. How does Kierkegaard establish, —if he does establish— the hierarchical ordering of the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious? Is there an argument somewhere, anywhere, in the literature which would look like those we find in Plato and Aristotle? My suggestion is this: If there is such an argument, it does not represent Kierkegaard's essential position on the inadequacy of the aesthetic, of the sensuous-erotic as a possible way of life for a human being.

The Kierkegaardian claim about the aesthetic, the sensuous-erotic, is that it is impossible. It is not really open to a human being to lead a life of pure immediacy in the sense immediacy has in the sensuous order. As an exercise in abstraction, the life of the emotions, of the passions, can be depicted as if it were autonomous. The *Diapsalmata* do this, *Don Giovanni* does this— he is a mindless sensuous force, dedicated to the moment in all its immediacy —unmediated, that is, by thought.

To call such a life a life of despair can mean at least two things. It can mean that a person leads such a life and subsequently, on reflection, repents of it, and falls into despair at the contemplation of past degradation. That is not what Kierkegaard means when he calls the sensuous life a life of despair. The despair in question is the recognition of the impossibility of leading such a life. Why impossible? The aesthetic life, the poetic life, the sensuous-erotic life is impossible for a human being because it is the effort to lead a consciously unconsciously life, to put one's mind to being mindless, to find in the immediacy of the moment that which can absorb an agent whose actions are always mediated by thought. It can't be done.

As is known, although he speaks of three spheres of existence, Kierkegaard made clear that he did not consider the aesthetic to

be an existence sphere. We can dream about it, imagine it, get intimations of it in works of art, most thoroughly, of Kierkegaard is right, in *Don Giovanni*, but it is not a life possibility for a human agent. It is a romantic dream, not a real possibility.

The proof of this lies in the attempt to eat the pudding. To be conscious of the pursuit of pleasure is inescapably to be separated from its immediacy, to see it in relation to other things, to the before and after.

There is a remark in the *Summa theologiae* that anticipates the Kierkegaardian point. Thomas has been pursuing an inquiry with which we are familiar from Plato and Aristotle, Augustine and Boethius —human happiness cannot be had in pleasure, in power, in wealth, in reputation and renown. Thomas develops marvelous arguments against each of these possibilities. And then he adds this: *eorum insufficientia magis cognoscitur cum habentur*: it is the having of such things that best reveals that they do not suffice to make us happy. Call this an existential argument. It is the kind of argument Kierkegaard favors. Augustine said it most memorably: *You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.*

Copyright of *Tópicos. Revista de Filosofía* is the property of Universidad Panamericana and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.