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

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Karsten Harries

Between Nihilism and Faith

A Commentary on *Either/Or*

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Editorial Note

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

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

Leonardo F. Lisi

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

Preface and Postscript

1

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

2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5

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

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

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

9 CUP, 193 / SKS 7, 177.

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

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

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

6

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7

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

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

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

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

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

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

8

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

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

14 Walter Rehm *Experimentum Medietatis*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

17 Karsten Harries "Modernity's Bad Conscience."

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

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

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

9

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

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

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

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

10

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

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

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

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

19 EO2, 207 / SKS 3, 199.

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

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

11

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

20 EO2, 72–73 / SKS 3, 77.

21 EO1, 146 / SKS 2, 146.