CHAPTER VII

THE ATTACK ON ROMANTIC ÆSTHETICISM

GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF KIERKEGAARD'S WORKS

WE are now in a position to approach the task of interpreting Kierkegaard's literary work in its wider significance, with special reference to its all-inclusive purpose. We shall deal only in outline with those works which express that purpose indirectly, and shall dwell more particularly on those which reveal it most characteristically.

Kierkegaard's works fall naturally into three main categories: the pseudonymous, the polemical, and the devotional writings. The pseudonymous writings in their turn may be divided into three sub-categories: (*a*) the æsthetic works: *Either/Or*, *The Repetition*, *Fear and Trembling*, *The Concept of Anguish*, *Stages on Life's Road*; (*b*) the philosophical works: *Philosophical Crumbs*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*; (*c*) the works attributed to Anticlimacus: *The Sickness unto Death*, *Training in Christianity*. The directly polemical writings include *For Self-Examination*, *Judge for Yourself* and *The Instant*. The devotional writings include the *Edifying* and *Christian Discourses* which Kierkegaard was at pains to issue parallel with his other books throughout the whole period of his work as an author, from *Either/Or* to *The Instant*. The three categories follow naturally upon one another, both chronologically and by reason of their contents. The next three chapters will deal in turn with the pseudonymous writings in their three sub-categories, and the following one with the polemical and devotional writings. Of these chapters, the one which deals with *The Sickness unto Death* and *Training in Christianity* will be the crucial one from the point of view of our present study; but it requires the preceding and following chapters to set it in true perspective.

The pseudonymous writings are not a mere succession of unrelated works. Apart from their relationship to Kierkegaard's personal problems, they show in some cases a noteworthy parallelism. Thus *Stages on Life's Road* takes up and carries further the theme of *Either/Or*; *The Sickness unto Death* takes up at a deeper level the subject of *The Concept of Anguish*; and *Fear and Trembling* prepares the way for *Training in Christianity*.

This parallelism is significant of the unity of thought and purpose underlying the whole of Kierkegaard's literary production.

A further significant connecting link between the various writings is indicated by Wahl's penetrating statement that Kierkegaard " triumphs over Romanticism by the aid of Hegelianism ; then he triumphs over Hegelianism by the aid of Romanticism. But, in reality, he is as far from the one as from the other. Romanticism and Hegelianism have both contributed to destroy the specific character of Christianity, the one by making it an æsthetic ornament, the other by making it a logical construction. The one is confusion of feeling, the other is confusion of thought. . . . German Romanticism had given birth to the infinite movement of the irony of Schlegel, to the infinite movement of the Idea of Hegel. Kierkegaard had felt, more than anyone else perhaps, the attraction of this double dialectic attitude, both of that which had broken the world into sparkling illogical fragments, and of that which brought it together into a massive and logical unity. But it is because he has felt the danger of these two attitudes that he issues the alarm-cry : Away from art, away from the idea." [1]

This statement shows the profound inward relationship between the writings we have called " æsthetic " and those we have called " philosophical ". It is a dialectical relationship, since it is made up of Kierkegaard's affinity with and aversion from Romanticism and Hegelianism. It is a relationship of fundamental importance for the right understanding of Kierkegaard's work, both in itself and in its relation to the time for which it was written—and for our own.

We may now turn to the more particular study of the æsthetic writings in which Kierkegaard " triumphs over Romanticism by the aid of Hegelianism."

THE ÆSTHETIC WAY OF LIFE

Æstheticism for Kierkegaard was not merely an art-theory but a specific way of life with definite characteristics of its own. In his day, the form which it took was Romanticism ; but what he has to say about it really applies to every form of hedonism, eudæmonism, *i.e.*, every form of life which takes pleasure or happiness as its highest aim. The Romantic æstheticism is pregnantly expressed in Novalis's motto, "*das Beste ist überall die Stimmung*" [2]: "*the best thing everywhere is the harmonious*

[1] Jean Wahl, *Etudes Kierkegaardiennes*, p. 113.
[2] *Lehrlinge zu Sais, Werke, ed. minor*, IV, 19, quoted Charles Du Bos, *Le Romantisme allemand*, p. 182 ; *cf. supra*, p. 8.

mood or atmosphere." Harmony with the cosmos in and through immediate feeling was, as we have seen,[1] the characteristic aim of Romanticism. Immediacy, spontaneity of feeling and intuition were its ideal of how the truly poetic individual should react to every situation. Its conception of religion was moulded in accordance with these presuppositions; it defined evil as anything which broke up its atmosphere or caused discord in its harmonious mood; and it had no room for any ethical demands which might conflict with them.

The strong point about Romantic æstheticism was its vital force. It eloquently expressed the elemental urge of humanity to respond spontaneously and passionately to the call of immediate feeling and direct perception of beauty. It excelled in the creation of an atmosphere in which the sensitive soul could experience a sense of union with nature or with the divine.[2]

All this Kierkegaard found immensely attractive. At the same time, however, he was forced by his temperament, upbringing and experience to acknowledge the inadequacy of Romanticism, of æstheticism generally, as a reliable guide through life. Inadequacy, indeed, is too weak a word. He saw in æstheticism a subtle and insidious adversary to the Christian way of life, and became convinced that it must be challenged and put to flight—in himself first of all. He felt Divine Governance helping him to put aside his own poetic (and philosophic) nature in order to become a Christian, by means of the æsthetic works he wrote, which were thus from one point of view "a necessary elimination," while from another point of view they were a "deceit" to help others towards the same insights which he had been granted.[3]

As against Romantic æstheticism, with its emphasis on immediacy and spontaneity of feeling, Kierkegaard proceeded to establish what he called "the categories of existence" or "the stages of existence", in such a way as to break up the harmony

[1] For a fuller treatment of Romanticism, *cf. supra*, pp. 6 ff.

[2] *Cf. supra*, quotation from Novalis, p. 8.

[3] *The Point of View*, p. 73. For Kierkegaard's relationship to Romanticism as a creative writer, *cf.* Hirsch's *Kierkegaardstudien*, I, pp. 52–61, 157–162, 405 ff., and *passim*. Kierkegaard tended to identify the Romantic-æsthetic view of human nature and way of life with what the Bible and Christian theology call the "natural man" generally. His judgment upon human life in general. This was one source of the "anti-human" trend of his final polemic. It also set very definite limits to his conception of his own function as a poet, a *maker*, a creative writer of the Romantic type. After 1848, however, he gained a new understanding of his task as a Christian poet, a "poetic reflector of Christianity," beyond the realm of merely æsthetic categories. And he finally found the fulfilment of his poetic calling in the polemic which gave his written presentation of Christianity the weighty support of an uncompromising personal witness. (Hirsch, *op. cit.*, I, 198 f., 226 f., 263, 387, 429 f.)

and spontaneity of the æsthetic reader's feeling and oblige him to *reflect* upon his existence and (if he chose) to pass through the various stages to the highest one—the Christian way of life, where he would find a higher spontaneity, an " immediacy after reflexion." " The movement from 'the poet' to religious existence is substantially the movement of my whole activity as an author integrally understood," he said.[1] And again: " My abiding merit in literature is to have presented the decisive categories of the whole range of existence so dialectically sharply and so radically as has not been done, at least to my knowledge, in any other literature." [2] And yet again: " I was concerned to present the various stages of existence if possible in *one* work—and that is how I regard the whole pseudonymous production." [3]

The first step in this process was *Either/Or*, in which " the transition made . . . is substantially that from a poet-existence to an ethical existence." [4]

EITHER/OR

" The world is . . . so weak, that if it believes that the man who declares the religious message is one who is unable to achieve the æsthetical, it ignores the religious." [5] For this reason among others, Kierkegaard began his literary career with a book worthy of a place in the front rank of the *belles-lettres* of world-literature: *Either/Or*. But this is more than just an ordinary literary work. It attacks æstheticism by what to-day would be called the tactics of infiltration, breaking up its positions from within and from the rear, and then follows this up by a frontal attack from an ethical position.

Very little of this polemical intention becomes directly apparent on the surface of the book, which was hailed by the arbiters of Danish literary taste as an æsthetic masterpiece. The book simply presents two sets of papers, edited by Victor Eremita, " A's Papers " and " B's Papers ", the one offering the reader a picture of various aspects of the æsthetic attitude to life, the other offering him a picture of the ethical attitude to life. But the two pictures reveal the effect upon human personality of the two attitudes in such a way that the reader will himself be led to choose between them as he sees on the one side the quest of beauty leading to disintegration and despair, and on the other

[1] *The Point of View*, p. 134, note.
[2] *Journals*, I, 279 (1846).
[3] *Journals*, I, 265 (1846).
[4] *The Point of View*, p. 74.
[5] *Journals*, I, 396 (1848).

sees the seemingly dull and boring life of obedience to ethical principle leading to integration and faith.

There can be no question here of analysing in detail the amazingly rich and complex papers which go to make up *Either/Or*. A brief indication must suffice.

"A's Papers" begin with a series of disconnected æsthetic meditations, scattered thoughts on poetical subjects, which remind one of Novalis's fragmentary communications [1] and breathe an atmosphere of Romantic melancholy and irony. Their very title is Romantically enigmatic—*ΔΙΑΨΑΛΜΑΤΑ*: *ad se ipsum*:—Broken Chords: to himself. Their prevailing mood is desperately sad. In an "ecstatic speech" entitled *Either/Or*, they declare: "Marry, you will regret it; do not marry, you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret both. Laugh at the follies of the world, you will regret it; bewail them, you will also regret it. Trust a girl, you will regret it; trust her not, you will regret this too. Begin it as you like, it will disgust you. Hang yourself, you will regret it; do not hang yourself, you will regret it too. This, gentlemen, is the sum of all the wisdom of life." [2]

This paper is followed by one entitled "The immediately-erotic Stages or the Musically-Erotic", which gives an extraordinarily penetrating interpretation of Mozart's music, showing that music is the true medium for expressing the immediately-erotic way of life, and culminating in Don Juan, who "just because he portrays, not a character, but principally *life*—is absolutely musical." [3]

Thereupon we are confronted with a paper on "The Reflex of the Antique Tragical in the Modern Tragical: an experiment in fragmentary striving." This and the following two papers are presented as having been read to the *Συμπαρανεκρώμενοι* (a group united in the fellowship of death). It discusses the ancient and modern conceptions of tragic guilt, which in both cases is a dialectical combination of guilty sorrow and innocent pain, but which in ancient tragedy depends upon an external conflict and in modern tragedy upon an inward conflict. It illustrates this by describing the conflict of a modern Antigone, whose tragedy would lie in her having to live with the painful and guilty secret of her father locked in her breast, and then falling in love and longing in vain to express her love by unreserved confidence. The treatment of this theme is clearly intended as

[1] *Cf. supra*, pp. 7 ff.
[2] *Either/Or*, translated into German by O. Gleiss, 4th edition, Dresden, Ungelenk, 1909, p. 43.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 127.

an indirect communication from Kierkegaard to Regine ; at the same time it introduces an element of reflexion and anguish which represents a deeper stage in the æsthetic way of life than that of Don Juan.

The next paper, " Silhouettes ", is still more clearly a word for Regine, as it deals with three young women in literature who have this in common that their lover deserted them : Marie Beaumarchais in Goethe's *Clavigo*, Donna Elvira in *Don Juan*, and Marguerite in *Faust*. It again carries the analysis of the æsthetic way of life deeper, showing that there comes a point in human sorrow where it can no longer be given outward expression by art because it involves a complete contrast between what appears outwardly and what goes on in the soul. This stage is called " reflective sorrow ",[1] because it is characterized by restless, never-ending, insatiable introspection regarding possibilities connected with the lost love. Marie Beaumarchais, the innocent fiancée abandoned by her betrothed, looks calm and quiet ; but within, her spirit moves fruitlessly to and fro, and knows no peace. Elvira, having lost her lover, Don Juan, cannot find herself again, and is " like one who remains on board of a wrecked ship, heedless of his life, because he wants to save something more, and yet cannot save it because he does not know what he is to save."[2] Marguerite, seduced like Elvira, differs from her by reason of the difference in quality between Don Juan and Faust, their betrayers. Faust is demonic like Don Juan but on a deeper level. He seeks in love, not enjoyment, but distraction from his doubt, " not sensual pleasure, but the immediate life of the spirit."[3] Marguerite is so overwhelmed by his immense superiority to her that she gives him whole-hearted faith and worship. When he leaves her, she has to say to herself that he did not after all believe what he had led her to believe. " So long as he was with her, she did not discover the doubt " which lay in the depths of his soul ; " but then everything changes, and she sees in everything a doubt which she cannot master."[4]

Upon this follows the " peroration in the Friday gatherings " of the *Συμπαρανεκρώμενοι* : an " enthusiastic address " entitled " The Unhappiest One ". The unhappy one " lives . . . either in the past or in the future time, but never in the present. The expression must be pressed here ; for it is obvious, as philosophy also teaches us, that there is a *tempus* which is present in a past time, and a *tempus* which is present in a future time ; at the same time, however, the same science tells us that there is a *plus quam perfectum* in which there is nothing present, and a *futurum*

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 182.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 216.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 218.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 220.

exactum in which the present is also entirely lacking. These are the individuals who live in hope and in memory. They are indeed unhappy individuals, in so far as they live in hope alone or in memory alone—if, that is, it is true that only the individual who is present to himself is happy." [1] The unhappiest one is he whose memory prevents him from becoming present to himself in his hope, and whose hope prevents him from becoming present to himself in his memory. " He cannot grow old, because he has never been young ; he cannot rejoice in his youth, for he has already grown old ; in a certain sense he cannot die, because he has not lived ; in a certain sense he cannot live, for he has already died ; he cannot love, for love is always present, and he has no present time, no future, no past—and yet he has a sympathetic nature, and he hates the world only because he loves it ; he is impotent, not because strength fails him, but because his own strength makes him impotent." [2]

Upon this follows a paper entitled ' The Rotation of Crops : Essay on a doctrine of social sagacity ', which begins with a truly Pascalian analysis of the misery of man, though it goes on to treat the matter with a light æsthetic irony not to be found in the *Pensées*. It starts from the " principle that all men are bored "—a principle which has an infinitely repellent force and so sends one out on a voyage of discovery.[3] People say that idleness is a root of all evil ; but really, idleness may be a divine life—if only one does not get bored. It is boredom which is a root of all evil. " There is a tireless activity which shuts a man out from the world of the spirit and puts him into the class of the animals which must instinctively always be in motion." [4] Such activity can do away with idleness, but not with boredom. " Boredom rests upon the void that passes through human life, and thus easily leads to the dizziness that seizes upon us when we look into a deep abyss." [5] " All who are bored cry out for distraction." [6] In such a situation one may cultivate change, rotate one's crops, in two ways : the vulgar way of seeking infinite variety of distraction, or the right way of limiting one's field and intensively cultivating variety of method and approach to whatever within it is food for distraction. This latter way is governed by the general rule of applying memory and forgetfulness in the right proportion. This means throwing hope overboard, because it disturbs the proportion which preserves one's balance and keeps one from compromising oneself—in friendship or in marriage. One must follow the two rules of social sagacity : to vary one's company, and to vary one's own moods at will.

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 230. [2] *Ibid.*, p. 234. [3] *Ibid.*, p. 244.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 248. [5] *Ibid.*, p. 249. [6] *Ibid.*, p. 250.