

Søren Kierkegaard.

A STUDY OF THE THIRD SECTION OF HIS *STADIA UPON LIFE'S WAY*.

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KIERKEGAARD'S *Stadia upon Life's Way* was published in 1845, when his age was thirty-two, and he had but ten years to live. The title is suggestive and poetical, and as such is not belied by the contents, for in this work Kierkegaard's rich and glowing diction, his psychological insight, his dialectic craft, and his mastery of the whole diapason of feeling, are seen at their best. For the uninitiated, however, the name of the book will hardly give the clue to the actual theme, and some little explanation may not be out of place.

The work by which Kierkegaard passed at a leap to the front rank of Danish literary genius was his *Either—Or*, published in 1843. The alternatives with which this work deals are the Æsthetic and the Ethical ways of life, or, more simply, the life of pleasure and the life of duty. These are not discussed in the manner of the moralist or the mere scientific investigator, but each side is exhibited by a representative adherent, who, in the frankest way, tells us of his thoughts, feelings, and actions. The reader is left to draw his own conclusions—a characteristic procedure of Kierkegaard at this period of his literary activity. Now the *Stadia upon Life's Way* takes up again the two modes of life, the Æsthetic and the Ethical, and once more each is set forth by its respective partisans; but a third stadium, namely, the Religious, is added, and dealt with in a similar way, save that it is supplemented by a series of comments by an 'observer' who calls himself Frater Taciturnus. The whole work is ostensibly given to the public by a Hilarius Bogbinder, and Kierkegaard's own name does not appear anywhere in the book.

Disregarding, for the sake of space, the reasons which led Kierkegaard to conceal his personality by an intricate system of pseudonyms, or rather pseudo-characters—a subject which would require a whole essay to itself—we proceed at once to say that the third section of the *Stadia* bears the rubric 'Guilty?—Not Guilty?' and that its essential part takes the form of a diary. The Religious stadium, in a word, is simply the story of an unhappy love-affair and a broken engagement, and is delineated

in the journal of the young man principally concerned. The entries are all made within some six months, but as the diarist uses his morning hour in recalling what took place 'a year ago to-day,' and at midnight sets down the reflexions and doings of the day just closed, the record really covers a period of a year and a half. The writer is a young man of twenty-five, and in his personality are combined a passionate love of the beautiful, a highly developed moral sense, and a keen intellectual power—gifts which, however, are so far counterbalanced by an inherent dejection and morbidity of spirit. 'Melancholy marked him for her own;' despondency was rooted in his very being. Even as a child he had felt its clammy chill in his soul, as an extract from one of his midnight reveries will show:—

'There was once a father and a son. A son is like a mirror, in which the father sees himself; and the father is likewise a mirror, in which the son sees what he will be in days to come. These two, however, seldom looked at one another in this way, for their daily intercourse was enlivened by cheerful and sparkling conversation. But now and again the father would stand still, and, bending a sorrowful countenance upon his son, would say to him, "Poor child, you live in dumb despair." Nothing more was ever said as to what these words might mean, true though they were. The father believed that he was responsible for his son's melancholy, while the son took the guilt of his father's sorrow upon himself—but never a word passed between them on the subject.'

As a matter of fact, the father *was* the cause of his son's 'dumb despair.' The elder man, brooding over a sin committed in his childhood, had become a prey to despondency, and the unwholesome spirit had with unabated virulence found its way into the child's soul, discolouring and embittering his whole personality. It is the source of all the trouble that follows.

The young man is attracted to a maiden of eighteen, and with (as he thinks) the fullest recognition of all moral demands, he becomes engaged

to her. She is a bright, innocent, happy creature, and her frank affection does for him what David's playing did for Saul; it drives away the evil spirit for a time, and he is hopeful that she may permanently deliver him from its grasp. She was not rich, as he puts it, but she might well say what the apostle said to the paralytic: 'Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I thee; rise up, be whole!' This gleam of hope, however, was soon quenched, and the old despondency again asserted its power, coming over the young man's spirit with such intensity as to convince him that it was past remedy, and that in all his plans and expectations for the future it must be taken into account as an inexorable fact. For it was no cloud of external circumstance that darkened his way: it was a shadow that he bore with him as he went.

As the betrothal did not bring the lasting emancipation it seemed to promise, the young man feels himself faced by a moral problem of the utmost gravity, namely, whether he should in honour follow up and consummate an alliance which could not but blight the maiden's young, fresh life. But having pledged her his word, and still yielding to her all the allegiance of his heart, he cannot meanwhile think of breaking troth with her, even in her own best interests. He resolves, therefore, to keep his melancholy in hiding from her; to wrestle with it in the secret places of his soul, but in all his dealings with her to wear the guise of optimism and geniality, so that she may still be his without danger or harm to herself. He soon sees, however, that such a policy is impossible; sooner or later his inner malady would burst from behind the curtains of concealment, show itself in his life as a Thing to which power had been given, and inevitably infect her too with its miasma. Here we give an illustrative fragment from another of his midnight entries: the soliloquy of Simon the leper:—

(Simon wakes out of his sleep among the tombs; his companion, Manasseh, also a leper, is nowhere to be seen.) 'What has become of Manasseh? . . . Manasseh! . . . Ah! he has gone off to the city. Well do I know why. I have made an ointment, the application of which will cause all the leprosy to strike inwards, so that no one can see it, and the priest must needs declare us clean. I showed Manasseh how to apply it; I told him that it did not really cure the disease, but forced it inwards, and that then our breath would infect

others, and give them the leprosy in a visible form. And Manasseh was wild with joy, for he loathes existence, he curses mankind, and he will be revenged; so he hurries to the city, breathing poison upon all. O Manasseh, Manasseh, why hast thou given place to the devil in thy soul, was it not enough to be leprosy in thy body?

'I will throw away the rest of the ointment, so that I may be tempted no more. God of our father Abraham, may I forget how it is made! Father Abraham, when I die, I shall awake in thy bosom, I shall eat bread among the purest, for thou hast no fear of the leper! Isaac and Jacob, ye do not fear to sit at meat with one who was a leper and abhorred of men! Ye dead, who sleep around me here, awake but for a moment, hear a word, only one word: take my greeting to Abraham, and bid him have a place ready among the Blessed for one who could find no place among men.'

The plan of screening his melancholy thus proving abortive, the young man casts about for another expedient by which to render the marriage possible. The idea comes to him that the burden of his rooted sorrow might somehow be shared, and so made tolerable for both, if they could unite in a truly *religious* fellowship. It is in religion alone that he finds relief, and in the likely case of the malady being conveyed to the maiden after marriage, religion might avail for her too. Accordingly, he seeks to turn her thoughts to sacred things, but as her innocence and her traditional faith are enough for her, she proves unsusceptible to the deeper voices of the spirit. His attempts to school her in religion are a complete failure; he succeeds merely in wearying her, and so that way of escape is also barred.

Eventually, then, he has to take a step which involves the sacrifice of his dearest affections and hopes, and the wronging of one who is more to him than all else in the world: he must break the engagement. But when he tells her of this resolve, the effect is beyond anything he had anticipated. She is simply stunned, for, though she had sometimes wondered at his strange manner, she had never understood its secret cause. Nor can she understand even now: the blow is but a piece of heartless and meaningless cruelty. She tells him that it will be her death, thus laying, as he says, a murder upon his conscience. She adjures him by the name of God; by that holy

name (Christ) which he seldom utters, though he venerates it more than any other name; and by his hope of salvation. He is staggered by these high and solemn appeals. His departed father's memory rises to rebuke him; the thought of Christ's name being used against him overwhelms him; and he withdraws the words by which he had sought a termination of the engagement.

Nevertheless, such is his ideal of marriage, and such his conviction that a marriage with him would be the deathblow of her happiness, that he cannot abandon his purpose of preventing their union, cost what it may. Only one way is now left. He must 'work her free'; he must bring her to such a view of him as will dispose her to make the rupture of her own accord. So opens what he calls his 'period of terror,' the period during which the furnace of agony is heated for him seven times. He begins by treating her as if his love for her were fled. As David changed his behaviour at Gath to save his life, the young man changes his to save his honour. He becomes an intolerable babbler of nonsense. He tries to efface every feature of his character that may have evoked her affection; he speaks and acts like a boor. Strange conduct, indeed; yet all for the highest end. On the altar of the ideal must be offered up his tenderest feelings; out of his very love for her, he must wound her to the heart. It is Abraham lifting his knife to slay his son (see Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*). But the young man's sacrifice, unlike Abraham's, is accepted to the last drop of blood, for at length she can bear no more, and bids him go. At last, then, he is free, and he has 'wrought her free,' as well.

The bond between these unhappy lovers being now ruptured, it might seem that the matter was ended. But the young man soon finds that, so far from that being the case, his ordeal of suffering has but taken another form. His mind begins to perplex itself with the question whether he has not done the maiden an irreparable injury. He has, it is true, made the only available exit from a dire and bewildered situation. But ought he not to have foreseen his incapacity for marriage, and so avoided giving a pledge he could not keep? Is he not guilty of bringing confusion into an innocently happy life? May he not have planted in her heart the seeds of mistrust, suspicion, unbelief, despair—and who shall say what the harvest may

be? Thus his conscience goes on tormenting itself with the question, 'Guilty or Not Guilty?' He listens eagerly for every word that others say regarding her; he even watches her on her walks, that he may discover whether the consequences of his conduct towards her are such as he dreads. But finding no conclusive answer to his question by that means, his mind simply preys upon itself, and the whole world seems for him to turn upon that one problem—'Guilty or Not Guilty?' Something has wormed its way into his life, and he cannot get it out again. 'A mussel lies upon the seashore. As it opens its shell in search of food, a child thrusts a stick between the valves, and the mussel cannot close them again. At length the child tires of his amusement and withdraws the stick. But a splinter remains behind, and though now the mussel closes its shell, it feels the pain within, and cannot expel the splinter. No one can see that there is anything the matter, for the mussel has shut itself in, but well the creature itself knows that the splinter is there.'

Is there no relief, then, for such a wretched and self-tormenting mind? Can the divided soul find nothing to annul the inner cleavage? Yes! once more religion comes to his aid, and peace and reconciliation come with it. The young man's misery leads him to a deeper understanding of himself; he realizes as never before his need for God, and it is only by laying hold upon the Divine that he wins a solace for his distracted spirit. Even so, it is true, he secures no permanent sense of triumph, for when his personal grasp of the Divine relaxes, he is again in the clutch of the evil thing—a mere insect in the hands of a cruel child. But so long as his soul clings to God, as Jacob clung to the angel at Peniel, so long, even in the sternest recognition of his guilt, he enjoys the priceless blessing of a humbled and repentant spirit, and the hope of the Divine forgiveness. Only in the living and working experience of religion does his strange lot gain meaning and purpose; only in God, as a personally appropriated fact, does his life, such as it is, become endurable at all.

Such, in the barest outline, is the narrative which runs through the third section of Kierkegaard's *Stadia*, and furnishes the motive of the Religious stadium. The theme is certainly one which, in the hands of a Meredith say, might have been wrought into a tale of outstanding power, but it is perhaps

not easy to see why Kierkegaard fixed upon such an unconventional story as the basis of his delineation of religion. Some explanation is necessary, and may, moreover, prove helpful in bringing us face to face with the distinctive principles of his method and work.

In the first place, religion was for Kierkegaard a fact of life, a section of actual experience—not a theory of life, or any view or conception of things, however true or imposing. He was a declared enemy of everything in the nature of a 'system' such as Hegelianism, which he held to be an 'attempt upon the life of morality.' He is little concerned with doctrine, nor has he any purpose of modifying the orthodox rule of faith. For him life is the great thing, and his exposition of religion must in consequence be the portrayal of an actual fusion of religion and life—of a soul in grips with God. A man's religion, in short, is not his thoughts about God, but the actual incidence and operation of Divine things in his experience. Hence it was quite in line with Kierkegaard's general standpoint to depict religion at work, to set forth its action and influence in a particular case. One of his favourite watchwords was *Existence*, and with that upon his lips he took the field against all whose rallying-cry was *Thought*.

Further, Kierkegaard was concerned to show that religion was an inward and personal matter, involving not merely one, but an endless series of volitions. It was not the actual truth of a man's belief that saved his soul, for such truth is essentially general; it was rather his personal appropriation of the truth. Not in the objective and the universal, but alone in the subjective and individual, lies the grand secret. He even affirmed, in fact, that 'Subjectivity is Truth,' *i.e.* that the ultimate value of a doctrine consists in its power to dominate the soul. 'Only the truth which edifies is truth for me,' as it is put in the last sentence of *Either—Or*. Orthodoxy or heterodoxy is a distinction of secondary moment, as witness a sentence from his *Final Unscientific Postscript*, published the year after the *Stadia*—'Take a man living in Christian society, who goes to the House of God, to the House of the true God, and with a true conception of God in his mind: say that he prays, but prays in falsity of heart; then take a man who lives amidst idolatry, but who prays with all the passion of infinity, though his eye be fixed upon an idol; in which of the twain is there most

truth? The latter prays in truth to God, even though he bows to an idol; the former prays to the true God in falsity, and therefore in reality worships a false god.' Here we have the idea of *Indersigthed*, 'inwardness,' which Kierkegaard opposes to the easy-going religion of his time.

Finally, should it be objected that the case of the young man in the story is of an extreme and abnormal character, Kierkegaard's answer will be that the individual is, as such, something apart and *sui generis*. Is it not a fact that men most frequently seek to extenuate their moral lapses by pointing to some exceptional factor in their particular disposition or circumstances? As a matter of fact, each has his own peculiar thorn in the flesh, which in a manner lies beyond the scope of the categorical imperative, and so makes him an exception. But then, Kierkegaard holds, it is precisely this unconformable and intrusive element—the splinter within the shell—with which religion is designed to deal; this it is which should drive a man to seek God, and which should provide the material in which religion performs its strange and special work. Religion, in short, recognizes that very element in a man which makes him exceptional; nay, it emphasizes and transfigures it, making it the basis of his peculiar relationship to God. Hence Kierkegaard's insistence upon the *Enkelt*, the individual in his unique and solitary travail with his soul and with his God.

We may observe, in concluding, that neither the diary nor its appendix of comments contains any direct appeal to the reader, who is left to make of the matter what he can, or rather what he *will*. The book resembles, and is in fact designed to be, a parable—one of those which give light to such as want to see, but which intensify the darkness to the wilfully blind. This is Kierkegaard's 'indirect method,' so characteristic of his earlier period. In his later works the appeal is direct, unmistakable, searching. But from first to last he had in view a single purpose, namely, to arouse men to a sense of the majesty, the sternness, the urgency of Christ's call to take up the cross and follow Him. Nor did Kierkegaard demand in others a stringency he had not first applied to himself. With unscaled vision he looked upon the ideal, and if sometimes, out of mercy to others, he seems to say that the ideal is too high for mortal strength, yet in his own hard and lonely ascent towards it he never faltered or looked back, and he died with the flag in his hand.