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KIERKEGAARD ON DECISION AND MARRIED LOVE

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Abbreviations Used

CUP Climacus, Johannes [Søren Kierkegaard]. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript.* Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.

EO I 'A', or anonymous esthete, et al [Søren Kierkegaard]. *Either/Or I.* Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.

EO II Judge William et al [Søren Kierkegaard]. *Either/Or II*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

MS II Karl Ove Knausgaard. *My Struggle, Book 2.* Translated by Donald Bartlett. New York, NY: *Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux,* 2013.

POV Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Point of View*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.

SLW Judge William et al [Søren Kierkegaard]. *Stages on Life's Way.* Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.

WL Kierkegaard, Søren. *Works of Love.* Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Introduction

> Make the test here: forget Christianity for a moment and think of what you ordinarily know as love; call to mind what you read in the poets, what you yourself can find out, and then say whether it ever occurred to you to think this: You *shall* love? Be honest, or, lest this disturb you, I will honestly admit that many, many times in my own life it has utterly amazed me, that at times it has seemed to me as if love lost everything thereby, even though it gains everything. Be honest, admit that with most people, when they read the poets' glowing description of erotic love or friendship, it is perhaps the case that this seems to be something far higher than this poor: "You *shall* love."
>
> -Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*[1]

> Love is the name given to a tumultuous, inconstant force that, upon the mere glimpse of another person, can drive us wild. How could that be preparation for two people to come together, in the stable, well-knit partnership that marriage is supposed to be? Is this a mystery that needs to be solved? Or is it an incoherence that permeates our lives with the concepts love and marriage? At stake is the possibility that we are living in a world structured by concepts that, in trying to live and understand ourselves through them, are likely to take us apart. Instead of a world in which it was at least possible to live a meaningful and fulfilling life, we would have a mere semblance of coherence that was everywhere threatened by disruptions, and emotional chaos.
>
> -Jonathan Lear, "Rosalind's Pregnancy"[2]

1: The vow to love

Imagine that you are at a wedding. Weddings can of course be very different from each other today. There are differences in the carefully curated music, the readings.

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[1] Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love,* trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 29 (hereafter WL).

[2] Jonathan Lear, *Wisdom Won From Illness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 121.

Whether the two persons to be married actually address each other or whether they leave most of the talking to others. Whether the ceremony is in a church or a courthouse or in the open air. Whether the wedding is intimate, or whether there are so many guests that the bride and groom don't know who some of them are. Whether the dress is white (and whether there is a dress at all). These differences are meant to show who this couple is, and when the ceremony does not suit them their guests may remark on it.

There is, however, one part of the ceremony that tends not to change much: the time when the bride and groom exchange vows. When they exchange vows, the couple will be engaging in one of the most conventional things that we still do in modern life. Even atheists and agnostics, rebels and individualists tend to tamper little with the text and its spirit. For this reason, it is all the more strange that it is here, in the vow, in the most traditional part, the liturgy that the bride may share with her mother and mother's mother, that we often have the most stark encounter with what, in marriage, is really most difficult to comprehend the meaning of. The most ancient part of the ceremony is also the part that comes closest to revealing how transgressive of the basic categories of human experience a modern marriage is. The language from the *Book of Common Prayer* dating back to the 11th century has the couple promising to "love and cherish" each other until they die. Almost all other traditional vows, even those that are not Christian, contain some variation on this promise: that we commit to continue to love this person.

This groom, with his words, is vowing that he will continue to love his partner. But what can he be saying? For one thing, everyone in the audience, his bride, he himself, has heard the news that the human heart cannot be commanded. He seems to say "I choose to love you" in the same moment that he acknowledges that heretofore he has not

chosen this person to love at all, but that he is overcome; that he, as we say, fell in love. Nor is the problem merely that this pair may be making promises on matters that are out of their control. Rather, there is, it seems, something unnatural in the very notion of a commitment to love. Something in the nature of romantic love twists away from the thought that it will someday be supported by an oath from the past. Twenty, thirty years hence, when this husband asks his wife whether she loves him, can we picture her saying: "Yes dear. You know I take that old promise of ours very seriously…"? If we can imagine her saying this, can we imagine that he would think that she was talking about love at all? The love that is supposed to be sustained in a modern marriage is an emotional love. This is the kind of attachment in which, let us say, the beloved's face delights the lover when she enters the room. This is love in which one feels at home, when one prefers this person because of how one responds to her. Part of the very idea, to us, of such love, is that it is a source. Such love is the origin of acts and words. It is not something we endeavor to have in our heart in order to get or fulfill or obey something else external to itself. And yet what is this promise, performed in the vow, going to be, if not something else external to the love itself? (Or what will the vow advance, what power will it have, if it isn't that)? On the face of it, if someone didn't know anything about marriage and attended a wedding, she might think that the transition the couple makes when they wed is to go from two persons who love each other spontaneously, to two persons for whom loving becomes an obligation. But how could love ever be an obligation? Wouldn't love lose everything thereby?

Things are no better when you look at the ceremony from the other side. From the other side, doesn't make an impotent muddle of the idea of such a serious and

consequential life-long partnership as joining one's livelihood, family, day to day activities, sexual needs, and virtually everything else, to another human being, that this bond is created out of one's passions at a particular period of one's life? Nietzsche joins many other bemused commentators when he observes that the more passionate the love that occasions a marriage, the less sensible the whole thing appears. He writes in *Daybreak:*

> We ought not to be permitted to come to a decision affecting our life while we are in the condition of being in love, nor to determine once and for all the character of the company we keep on the basis of a violent whim: the oaths of lovers ought to be publicly declared invalid and marriage denied them:—the reason being that one ought to take marriage enormously more seriously![3]

When this bride asks, twenty years hence: "What are we doing in this marriage?", is her spouse going to answer: "We've got to stick to what we felt and said on our wedding day"? What sort of validity could the latter possibly have for them, if the love was actually gone?

Or is the truth just that the vow doesn't have validity? A third way of looking at the paradox is this: in the 21st century, with our laws and mores being what they are, how can there be any actual power in the vow? It is true that three hundred years ago the vow used to effect, and represent, a true transition and a true binding. Because whatever the

[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak,* trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 151.

original basis of the marriage was—even if the basis was a passionate love—one couldn't exit a marriage just because one's feelings had changed or it wasn't what one had expected. But this, for most people, is no longer the case today. Far from it. In fact the truth we all know is that today, if emotional love is the condition, the circumstance, that moves the two people to marry, it remains a condition *on* the viability of the marriage year by year. This isn't just because we have laws on the books for unilateral no-fault divorce and prenuptial agreements. It is because we live in a culture that considers a loveless marriage more monstrous than a broken home. Today a marriage is a lie if it lacks love. So if love has every prerogative, in what way can a modern marriage's promise itself have any substance? How has anything changed from the way the couple was before they said the words "I do"? Or is marriage now no more than a piece of paper and a party, with a few remnants of material significance: tax breaks and the codification of property entanglements in the event of future litigation?

In *Either/Or*, Søren Kierekgaard's pseudonym Judge William, writing in a letter to his friend, the anonymous esthete, imagines the latter reflecting on the suspicious mix of love and duty in marriage.

> Here is duty. I take it upon myself to do a specific something; I can stipulate exactly what it is I promise dutifully to fulfill. If I do not do it, then I am faced with an authority that can compel me. On the other hand, if I form a close friendship with another person, love is everything here. I acknowledge no duty; if love is over, then the friendship is finished. To base itself on something unreasonable like

> that is reserved solely for marriage. But what does it mean to commit oneself to love? Where is the boundary? When have I fulfilled my duty? In what, more closely defined, does my duty consist? In case of doubt, to what council can I apply? And if I cannot fulfill my duty, where is the authority to compel me? State and Church have indeed set a certain limit, but even though I do not go to the extreme, can I not therefore be a bad husband? Who will punish me? Who will stand up for her who is the victim?[4]

I take it that the esthete's point (as the Judge reconstructs it) on the lack of "boundaries" in the commitment to love is that if, in a marriage, our obligation is to remain in love, and our love is, to us, the ground of this obligation, then there can be no case in which the obligation can actually apply and move us. William imagines the esthete concluding "above all let's not scramble the eggs—duty is duty and love is love, and that's that, and, above all, no commingling." (EO II 150).

If you ever do, at a wedding, have the feeling of perplexity I am describing, you are likely to feel a bit alone with your puzzlement. No one, at weddings, jumps up to object. If, at a wedding, you look around, most likely everyone will seem sanguine, as though these were just the words for the occasion: that some synthesis of love and obligation is just what they have come to see alchemized at the altar. It is emotional; someone is wiping away tears, someone is solemn, someone is grinning ear to ear. It is

[4] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part II*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987) 150 (hereafter EO II).

not, apparently, alarming. In weddings we commit to love. From outside the ceremony, it seems like a badly mangled thought. Looking around at most any audience at an actual wedding ceremony, on the other hand, it would seem to be among the choicest sights, as if, with this promise, we lift the veil for a moment on something that the human heart is capable of that is more noble and real than our day to day pursuits and occupations.

The topic of this dissertation is this: how are we to understand the wedding vow and its promise to love? More specifically, is there anything to the notion that we commit to continue to love someone? Is there, despite the paradoxicality, a truth in it? Is there, in Jonathan Lear's words, a mystery to be solved here? If so, how can we begin to solve it? Are these two people doing something incomprehensible, "scrambling the eggs", bringing two things—erotic love and duty—together that cannot form a coherent and stable unity? Or is it only when we comprehend the conditions of the possibility of a vow to love that we appreciate and honor what love can be? Is an obligation to love nonsense, or is it a higher form of existence?

2: Explaining away the vow to love

There is a very real possibility that the answer is no, there is no mystery to be solved at a wedding. It is possible that the vow, and modern marriage itself, is not so much a mystery as a misunderstanding. Here, for example, are two explanations of why no one jumps up at weddings, that do not interpret the commitment to continue to love as containing any sort of deeper reality.

(1)

First, maybe people don't jump up at weddings because they (however unconsciously) understand and accept that the mix of erotic love and obligation in the modern marriage vow is due to an accident of forces in our too-rapidly evolving culture. What we need in order to understand the wedding vow is not so much an interpretation as a genealogy. The genealogy might go something like this: The institution of marriage used to have practical aims like the establishment of legitimate heirs, the joining of two extended families, the subjugation of the female sex, the exchange of property and power. In the two-thousand year history of in the West, the institution has shifted emphasis by class and culture; but until recently it was always, in large part, a transaction, where an ongoing exchange of real goods took place. (There may have been an expectation that affection would grow between the spouses, but affection was not normally the impetus for marriage, nor the goal. In fact it could be a liability). Then at some point—historians situate it somewhere in the Enlightenment—the way we thought about marriage began to pivot fundamentally. We had what historians call the 'love revolution': people began to marry for the sake of love, and to consider this the ideal way to be married. This had a lot of causes, not least among them an increasing independence of young people from the material support of their families and *vice versa.* The result is that in our own time, marriage itself has in large part become coopted by this new desire, a first-world problem: a need for (and an expectation of) companionship and a fulfilling romantic relationship.

So (such a genealogical explanation might assert) with the vow what we in fact

have is the older logic of transaction—A promises to deliver such and such to B, and B to A—that was entirely fitting for what a marriage once was. And we've taken this contractual form and clumsily grafted the idea of loving onto it. So the couple speaks words that unreasonably declare "I promise to deliver love."

So maybe these two things, love and commitment, coexist in marriage today, but they are not in any kind of harmony. They are together because modern marriage itself—and with it its ceremony—has been shaped more by the happenstances of history, the collision of old needs and new possibilities, than by sense or insight. And maybe people know this. Maybe people don't jump up at weddings and shout that this is ridiculous because they don't think that anyone takes the idea itself too seriously.

(2)

This is one way of explaining away the vow that does not attempt to find in it any poignancy or fitness for our human nature, any revelation of love's capacities. Another way to look at it is that the vow to love is only problematic if we misunderstand the kind of love that is being promised. On the one hand, such an explanation might go, there is passionate, sexual love. Passionate love is indeed fickle and arises suddenly and can suddenly disappear. When we think of passionate love, the notion that we commit to continue to love someone seems contrary to nature. On the other hand, however, there is a more mellow, mature kind of companion love that we find in, for example, a long friendship. This companion love is stable, and can be reliably cultivated if we give it the conditions in which it grows. This latter kind of love is not by nature opposed to the idea of obligation as a motive.

Thus (this two-loves explanation goes) the paradox of the vow is no paradox, because when the bride says she we will love this man or woman, what she means (even if she doesn't fully understand it at the time) is that she commits to cultivate companion love, not passionate love, in the long future of the marriage. Perhaps she can't cause this directly. She cannot cause companion love to thrive in her heart by willing it any more than she can cause passionate love. But she can set up the conditions and do the things that reliably nurture it. And we know, more or less, what these are. Indeed, they are the things that the officiant's address to the couple at the ceremony so often dwells on, and the advice that friends and family will dispense in their toasts: listening, laughter, respect, small acts of caring, honesty, and so forth. To promise to do the things that cultivate companion love in these ways is neither nonsensical nor terribly unrealistic. Two people, as we say, start as lovers and become best friends.[5]

It is clear, to a degree, that each of these explanations is well founded. They do go some way in explaining what might be happening at the altar. And perhaps it is one or both of these explanations that one would hear if, at a wedding, one asked a guest what had prevented her from standing up and declaring that this is all wrong.

Yet this thesis starts by supposing, wondering, whether there is something more going on. When we commit to continue to love someone at a wedding ceremony, is it enough to say that we are committing to indirectly cultivating companionable love? Is it

[5] Such a view of marriage has a long history, notably among feminists such as Wollstonecraft and Mill. For a contemporary example see Ruth Abbey, and Douglas Den Uyl, "The Chief Inducement? The Idea of Marriage As Friendship", *Journal of Applied Psychology* 18 no. 1 (2001): 37-52.

enough to shrug off the meaning of these words as something senseless thrown up by the repurposing of old forms? Or might "I shall love" be the appropriate words with which to enact something that it is the ability, and the nature, of the human heart to enact? Is the vow to love a mistake of history, destined to destroy the institution? Or is the vow to love, on the contrary, so real and felicitous that it has preserved the institution of marriage over centuries of upheaval that have seen the loss of almost all of its old purposes and rules? Does it articulate, rather, something real and vital to a fully lived erotic life, and a fully developed romantic relationship?

3: Judge William's account of decision and married love

The dissertation is undertaken on a hunch that if we explained away the vow to love, we would be explaining away the phenomenon of modern marriage and marital love itself. Historically not many philosophers have written on this topic directly. There have been very few apologists for the idea that in a marriage we commit to continue to love someone, meaning by this an erotic love. Before the love revolution, when marriage was defended, in the mode of, for example, Augustine or Aquinas, the trend was to explain and justify marriage by pointing out its role in society or morality. In the centuries since the idea of marrying for love became the ideal in mainstream Western culture, this approach has remained, somewhat surprisingly, the norm.[6] Few, at any rate,

[6] See for example the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's entry for "Marriage and Domestic Partnership" and almost all of its bibliography.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marriage/#Bib>

undertake to defend this core concept, the idea of marrying for (and out of) love. Those who do address it directly tend to do so in order to criticize the idea.[7]

There is, however, one very notable exception, as I have indicated. As I understand it, the paradox of the vow—the idea, in his words, that erotic love, in all its immediacy, and a "shall" can come together in marriage—was an obsession of Søren Kierkegaard; or, rather, it was an obsession of one of his pseudonyms, Judge William. In *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way* I take it that Kierkegaard puts his finger on the problem I have been describing, as in the quote above, and composes an interpretation and defense of the vow to love. Specifically the Judge William writings on marriage constitute an attempt at a phenomenology of the possibility of "choosing" our own love for someone, and a more mature form of erotic love, one in which the erotic love is

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[7] Criticisms of the compatibility of love and marriage also have a very long tradition, going back at least to Ovid's influential *Ars Amatoria.* Probably the most famous formulation of the idea is in Andreas Capellanus's twelfth-century tract *The Art of Courtly Love,* which depicts the Comtesse de Champagne rendering the verdict: "We declare and we hold as firmly established that love cannot exert its powers over two people who are married to each other. For lovers give each other everything freely, under no compulsion of necessity, but married persons are in duty bound to give in to each other's desires and deny themselves to each other in nothing." Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love,* trans. John Jay Parry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 106.

Philosophers today criticizing the notion of marrying for love make a similar argument. See for example Robert Burch, "The Commandability of Pathological Love", in *Eros, Agape, and Philia* ed. Alan Soble (St Paul: Paragon House, 1989); Elizabeth Brake, *Minimizing Marriage* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012); and Anca Gheaus, "The (Dis)value of Commitment to One's Spouse" in *After Marriage* ed. Elizabeth Brake (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). These philosophers each argue that the love an individual wants and needs in a romantic relationship is necessarily a free response, and thus cannot derive from a rule or promise. The idea of commandment (Burch) or commitment (Brake and Gheaus) necessarily involves an agent being motivated to conform to the commandment or commitment, which violates the essential sovereignty of love.

focused on the resolution itself, flowing from this choice. This is what William takes modern marriage to mean. In his argument William makes no mention of the idea that the vow to love is a happenstance of history. Nor, I believe, does he suggest that marital love is a kind of companionship different from erotic love. Remarkably, in some 435 pages he never touches on either of these ideas in any form. Nor does he argue that marriage is a moral or social good.[8] William, instead, takes direct aim at the elucidation of marriage and marital love as a mode of committing to love someone, and argues that the commitment causes the love itself to be transformed and perfected. He writes, "So you see the nature of the task I have set for myself: to show that romantic love can be united with and exist in marriage—indeed, that marriage is its true transfiguration." (EO II, 31). The Judge is aware of the difficulty of his task. It is in this spirit that he remarks:

> For the bridal couple who in that sacred moment, or when they think about it later, do not find that in a certain sense it is nonsense for the pastor to say to the lovers that they shall love one another, and on the other hand do not find, if I dare say so, that it is very splendidly stated— such a bridal couple lack a marital ear. Just as it is delicious to discern the whispering of falling in love, this precious witness at the wedding, so that rash phrase is welcome that says: You shall love her. How dithyrambic a wedding ceremony is; how almost presumptuous that one is not satisfied with falling in love but calls it

[8] I argue for this more controversial claim in Chapter Two.

a duty.[9]

Judge William's writings comprise four works. Two of them, entitled (though not by William) *The Esthetic Validity of Marriage* and *Balance Between the Esthetic and Ethical*, are letters addressed to his friend, the esthete, whom we know as "A". The third is a short note to A introducing a sermon written by an old friend of William's. These three works are collected in *Either/Or,* published in 1843. The fourth work is a manuscript, *Reflections on Marriage*, collected in *Stages on Life's Way* in 1845. For the most part the thesis will follow the argument in the terms William uses in *The Esthetic Validity of Marriage,* with support from the other texts.[10]

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[9] Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way,* Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988) 111 (hereafter SLW).

[10] In this thesis I will treat the Judge William writings as wholly compatible with each other. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johanness Climacus indicates that the publishing of *Stages on Life's Way* was a sort of protest against the cult of novelty: that the reader is challenged to read the same things again that she had read in *Either/Or*, as against the trend wherein "change is the supreme law". Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, Volume 1,* trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 286 (hereafter CUP). Judge William himself, alluding to Socrates, prides himself on saying "always the same and about the same" (SLW, 118). In his letter introducing the Jylland Pastor's sermon, William refers to his earlier letters and writes,

> If I were to write to you now, I perhaps would express myself differently. [….] As far as the thought is concerned, however, it is and remains the same, and I hope that in time the movements of thought will become easier and more natural for me, unchanged even if they are silent because the expression has faded. (EO II 337).

One very important question, however, does arise about the compatibility of the Judge William writings with each other; but it is not, as one might assume, a question of the compatibility between the accounts in *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way.* It is,

In all his writings Judge William ranges freely from topic to topic: religion, the female sex, art, German philosophy, the spirit of the times. His writings include discussions of monasticism and mysticism, skepticism, the nature of freedom, time, money, and Christianity. William's arguments often cut across a few of these territories at once. In this thesis I will have to resist getting tangled up with them in ways that get my own inquiry off track. The thesis will, regrettably, also not have time for an extended discussion of A, or *Either/Or's* three other pseudonyms, or any of *Stages on Life's Way's* other pseudonyms. The final end of the thesis is to better understand the wedding vow, and what it means to commit to continue to love someone; and to do that I will have to stay very focused within William's wider interests. Even within his account of marriage, there is more than enough to do if we stick closely to the main thread of the argument: to the transfiguration of erotic love by an act of decision.

The argument as I see it revolves around two concepts that the Judge elucidates n relation to each other. One is his conception of "first love". First love is erotic love as it flourishes before the marriage and the transformation that this occasions. It is important to distinguish the character of first love from falling in love. Falling in love—the event or process with which we find ourselves taken with So and so—is something that happens to us quite apart from our own agency. Falling in love is a given, a "a gift of the god"

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rather, the compatibility of the two long letters from *Either/Or* with each other. In the first letter, William describes the person who makes the transition form the esthetic to the ethical in marriage as making a choice that he comes to through his first love. In his second letter, William instead writes of the transition to the ethical as occasioned by, and accomplished through, a kind of despair, an idea that it totally absent from the first letter. I will address this apparent discrepancy in Chapter Three.

(SLW, 121). It isn't something we can choose or cause or reason our way into (which, as we will see, is not to say that it is blind). In this respect, Judge William's views on falling in love are in agreement with everyone, including the sensibilities of the 'romantic age' and 'reflective age' that he discusses, the young esthete, as well as most philosophers, living and dead, who have written on the topic. To many of these thinkers and traditions, however, the same involuntariness that marks the way we fall in love is endemic to erotic love much more generally, as it continues. William makes his first move in parting ways with many of these others when he argues that although falling in love is a gift, the love into which we fall, even in its earliest stage, or what he calls "first love", does not exist apart from the lover's active attempt to develop it through time. First love lacks reflection and decision, but it consists in the lover's activity for the sake of its own existence.[11]

This is related to the sense in which, in William's terms, first love is 'abstract'. According to William, first love involves a desire, though not a desire that has a desideratum in the normal way. It is different in two related respects. First, although some desires are defined by having such and such a desideratum, some discrete thing that is wanted, someone in first love has no definite thing that he wants, other than vaguely to be with the beloved. Instead, first love awaits a definition of its desideratum into something more and more concrete as it develops. In fact, this is really the right way to describe what the desire is for: to develop the love by being with the beloved in a

[11] This conception alone guarantees that William's theory of love will be very different from most of 20th and 21st century published work on the subject. With a few exceptions, modern philosophers have paid very little attention to love as something that develops in a person. Contemporary treatments tend to want to approach love as a stable psychological or volitional way of being toward the beloved. An exception to this trend that has had a large, if indirect, influence on my interpretation in this thesis, is Jonathan Lear's *Love and Its Place in Nature.*

relationship. This makes first love very unusual. First love is an impulse *that is in part constituted by a drive for the development of this very impulse itself in oneself and the other.* Someone in first love doesn't want her desires to be satisfied. The love is, rather, like an itching thing that seeks to grow in her and become her life.

This is related to the sense in which, in William's words, first love has "the qualification of the eternal". To the romantic point of view (similar to, though not synonymous with, first love), which William criticizes and rejects, love is said to be "eternal" in the naïve and straightforward sense that the romantic is convinced that he will go on loving So and so forever, no matter what. The romantic relates to this as a matter of fact, in the mode of natural necessity. The eternity of the romantic's love is something suffered by him, quite apart from his own will or activity. William (like A) appreciates that on these terms the eternity of love is an illusion. It is, in reality, the nature of first love to "prove to be an illusion" (EO II, 21) with time when it is interpreted in this romantic way by the lover.

In a very different sense, however, according to Judge William, first love does have what he calls the "qualification of the eternal". First love has the "qualification of the eternal" in the sense that to be in first love, to feel its pathos and power, is essentially bound up with a reinterpretation of one's whole life in light of that love. In William's terms, first love already "contains the whole" (EO II 39, 41). He says that for people that are happy in love, "the first contains the promise of the future, is the motivating, the infinite impulse." (EO II, 39). The experience of first love, in fact, is always an experience of an interanimation between the passion as it is felt and acted upon today, at this particular place and time, and the possibility that that passion raises for one's life.

This is what is most essential to first love: first love projects a past and future life of love out from our present experience of being with the beloved, and this vision, in turn, infuses what is present to us with portent and intensity. In first love, we do not yet will (that comes with reflection). We are, rather, (this is my term) willful, in the sense that our understanding of our own love is mixed up with what we wish to be the case in the matter. Usually when we call someone willful it is to say that his judgment is corrupt. In first love, willfulness has a strange kind of truth to it. Being in first love means emotionally inhabiting a vision of a lifelong love with So and so. And this vision, in turn, *gives the love the vitality it needs to realize this vision*. Because of its willfulness, however, first love is incompatible with a certain kind of reflection. According to William, doubt—truly detached, disinterested appraisal of one's own assumptions—if applied to love, would by definition compel the lover to set aside the very willfulness that is essential to the inner dynamics of his first love. Doubt "annihilates" love (EO II, 29, 94).

This brings us to the second concept in Judge William's account of marital love: the concept of choosing onseself. *Either/Or* is a book about choosing. William writes that 'to choose' is "my watchword, the nerve in my life-view." (EO II, 211). More specifically, *Either/Or* is a book about the role of decision in the life of one's passions. William's writings aim to provide a phenomenology of a certain mode of decision that is essential to a full human life, but that it is possible to become blind to. William's main illustration of this kind of decision is the decision with which we marry.

A significant part of the service that I try to offer in this thesis is to distinguish the

concept of choosing as Judge William develops it, from the sort of decision one might wrongly take to be essential to all rational and free action—what I am going to call a deliberative decision. This is not how William approaches the topic (he just writes of choosing as though this was the only authentic form of decision), but I think that the distinction is a useful one for understanding what he has to say.

When we make many decisions, I take it, in principle our decision is supposed to follow from reasons that come into play in determining it. Decisions of this kind have a certain form of validity: they have validity to us insofar as we think that the decision was grounded on good reasons. Often, such a decision is what I am going to call a deliberative decision. When one undertakes to make a deliberative decision on some open practical matter one's deliberation on it in principle excludes the influence of one's own prior intentions regarding the action in question, so that one's decision can instead be determined by one's reasons in reflection. In other words if, previously, one has thought that one was going to do A, or has been doing A, or decided to do A, and now one is trying to decide, in an open and rational way, whether to do A or B; to deliberate well (in a sense, to deliberate at all) is, in part, to do what one can to step back from one's own prior plans and imaginings, and set them to one side. To say, "wait, let me consider carefully" is in part to make sure that that detachment happens, so that we don't have a sham deliberation with a foregone conclusion. In a deliberative decision, the relevant reasons considered afresh in the deliberation might themselves be emotions and personal preferences. What distinguishes a deliberative decision is not coolness but, rather, the structural relationship between the basis of the decision and the decision itself. In a decision of this kind, one's decision is to be determined by the validity of the things that

one considers in reflecting on it, rather than the other way around. And the legitimacy of the decision rests, in part, on the idea that this order has been maintained.

It is easy to think of cases when a decision really ought to be a deliberative one, so much so that we might think that this is the only legitimate form of decision, or the only kind with which we act as a rational or autonomous being. What is more difficult to appreciate is that sometimes something cannot be a deliberative decision. *Specifically, a deliberative decision is not possible whenever the relevant reason or ground is of such a nature that its existence, in the moment of reflection, depends upon our own decision in relation to it.* According to William, as I understand him, this is the case with the most important thing in life: it is the case with first love. In marrying, argues William, one "chooses oneself" in the sense that through an act of the will one takes hold of one's unreflective first love and, through this act of decision, through the "I do", transforms that passion into something strong and authoritative—in William's language, 'valid'—in one's emotional life. In other words, through and by way of this alternative sort of decision, one's love becomes or remains a reason in one's life. This is the alternative kind of decision William is explaining.

In a deliberative decision, the direction of the will follows from our consideration of the reasons. In choosing oneself, by contrast, the decision one makes to pursue such and such a possibility is in part how one gains in oneself the ground of that commitment—i.e. how one gains or perfects the love. As William puts it, "The choice itself is crucial for the content of the personality: through the choice the personality submerges itself in that which is being chosen, and when it does not choose, it withers away and dies." (EO II, 163). This transformation, he argues, does not mean the

replacement of the passion of love with something sober, or a loss of love's immediacy. It is, rather, the birth of a "new immediacy", with a deeper felt passion. Rather than relying on reasons that are external to itself, the marriage relies on an "inner law of motion" in the marital love. Once one has married, it is the emotional marital love and attachment created in, and now focused upon, the decision, that moves us moment to moment in married life.

It is entirely possible for something that looks very like marriage to come about by a deliberative decision. Jane stops to reflect and consider that John has such and such material prospects. John makes her happy, he's good looking, she admires what he is doing with his life, and so on. She reflects in order to make her decision. In making the decision, Jane brings before herself these things—among which may be her own feelings—, this deliberation determines her decision, and her will to marry John is founded on it.

According to William, however, this is not how true marriage and married love works. Annie, let us say, is in love. This first love is, from the first moment, fundamentally "ideal": its existence in Annie is inseparable from Annie inhabiting a vision of that love relationship itself penetrating and shaping her life. The pathos of her love is bound up with that vision. For Annie to decide—in other words, to marry, to say "I do"—is not to be led by reasons she thinks are objectively compelling and that abrogate her heretofore incipient, unreflective will (for if she sets this aside she will no longer be in first love); it is, rather, to perceive the world and understand herself through the contemporary act of devotion that develops her first love into something substantial in

herself and her day to day acts: a shared life of loving. As William puts it, "[T]he intention here is not the acquired fruit of doubt but the overabundance of the promise." (EO II, 61). When Annie marries, the validity of her decision is not supervenient upon the idea that she possesses good reasons to be married. William claims that when she marries, rather, she transfers the erotic energy with which she makes the decision onto the decision itself. When one marries, a decision truly takes on a life of its own. With this decision, Annie and her husband's marriage can, as William puts it, "acquire a history", which is a matter of the inner, intentional development of the resolution to love itself—in other words, of the marriage—in relation to life's to-be-determined material facts and challenges. To be married is for simple acts to acquire the significance of this project for her and her spouse. Trivial things acquire a new meaning and pathos: having tea, throwing her clothes in the laundry basket, and so on, become a manifestation of the decision to be (and remain) married. Just as important, temptations and losses become appropriated as part of the love's history, rather than representing an unenjoyed, unclaimed, or out of reach competing world of value.

One of the debates that has exercised Kierkegaard scholars and others in the last thirty years is whether the transition between the ethical and esthetic "life spheres" by something like a decision to marry constitutes what Alastair McIntyre has called a "criterionless choice"[12]. I will only address, and begin to use, the terms 'esthetic' and 'ethical' late in this thesis, for reasons I will explain at that time. But as I understand

[12] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1984) 39-42.

McIntyre's choice of words, a 'criterion' would be, at a minimum, a standard one would look to to guide one's decision, whose validity does not, in principle, depend on the decision that one ends up making. So on my interpretation of *Either/Or,* McIntyre is correct that the decision to marry in William's account is a criterionless choice. In William's account, one is not led to one's decision to marry (and thus enter upon an ethical life) by any criterion, because one gains the relevant reason—one's erotic love—in that moment only by virtue of the choice one makes.

The problem with McIntyre's account in general, like the problem with calling Kierkegaard's choice "irrational", is that it is so easy to confuse with the idea that one's decision was groundless or in some sense arbitrary. This is not at all the case. The decision is not arbitrary. For the Judge, the decision to marry is based on what is, in a way, closest to one's own soul and essence as a person: one's first love. We make the transition from the esthetic to the ethical not by, in William's phrase, "setting something up as the beloved", but by "accepting the beloved" (SLW, 121), not by creating but choosing (EO II, 215). This is why I prefer the distinction I have drawn between choices and deliberative decisions: the relevant difference is between two ways in which, in a decision, the ground (in this case, erotic love) relates to the resolution, not whether there is a ground.

I take it that a reader of the William texts is meant to find these ideas unusual and a bit lawless. Surely reasons are reasons when they are logically prior to, and are the basis for, our determination. It cannot go the other way. Yet I take it that this is the upshot of William's first letter: the stubborn idea that this text is designed to dislodge from our brains. The ideal of a bare, unadulterated fact of the matter that is to be found in self-

refection prior to a decision does not, in this case, respect the nature of the phenomenon of erotic love.

In a way, I take it, a deliberative decision, by way of doubt, can seem like *the* archetype of human decision-making, as though it exemplifies what makes a decision a decision, what decision is for. But by another light choosing oneself is the very essence of a decision. A decision is a determination of one's own will, based on something in oneself (in this case, the first love), whereby the resolution itself acquires authority and substance in one's life going forward.

William's theory, I believe, goes some way in responding to the paradox of modern marital love. That paradox was: If love somehow did become an obligation, wouldn't it lose everything—wouldn't it necessarily become something very different from the spontaneous and sovereign thing that we call love? Given that erotic love cannot be commanded, in what way can a promise to love have any purchase? From the other side, what does marrying amount to in a love relationship, if love is to retain all the prerogatives in modern marriage anyway?

William's account, as I understand it, provides a response to these perplexities. According to William, we marry for love. But the decision to marry is never, not even as we say "I do", based on the validity of the love that we perceive in ourselves or the other, whose existence we can merely know, and which we take to be our reason in the normal sense. Rather, the decision itself is (in part) what makes the love exist in that crisis. This becoming is what we're accomplishing when, at a wedding, we commit to continue to

love someone.

The thesis is broken up into five chapters. In Chapter One, "First Love", I write about William's conception of love as it exists in the individual before the resolution. First love involves a kind of yearning, where the desideratum is the development of the love itself. First love has the "qualification of eternity" in the sense that it essentially exists in light of a whole life. What is most challenging in William's conception of first love, as I understand it, it so see how love always involves an interanimation between what one experiences in the present and the possibility—a life together with So and so—that the experience points to. As a way to illustrate these ideas, I make use of passages from Karl Ove Knausgaard's autobiographical novel *My Struggle: A Man in Love.*

In Chapter Two, "William and Doubt" I try to explain how the pseudonym Judge William, who claims that his implacable conviction is his "only competence" in writing on marriage (SLW, 91), and whose utterances and attitude seem designed to raise the question of whether he is self-deceived, is supposed to be the personification of a very real insight in relation to reflection, doubt, and erotic love. Doubt is the suspension of our own prior assumed attitude or knowledge in relation to some question of fact, so that we can instead come to see the world (and ourselves in it) objectively, as we actually are. William says that such doubt is incompatible with first love. If we direct doubt upon our own love, we "annihilate" it (EO II, 29, 94). An individual who is in love knows she is in love. But it is a category mistake to think that a doubter can ever be accurate about whether he is really in love, because in the case of first love there is no independent knowable thing that exists when we suspend our own willfulness in relation to the matter.

William writes, “The supposed objectivity that doubt has, and because of which it is so exalted, is a manifestation precisely of its imperfection.” (EO II, 212).

In Chapter Three, “Decision”, I describe a distinction between two kinds of decision, as I have outlined above. William thinks that first love is transformed by decision, but, importantly, it is not decision that gets its authority from a mode of rational detachment and doubt. Instead, in what William calls choosing oneself, the volition that one invests in such and such a possible action is precisely how one takes possession of the ground one has for the decision. In Chapter Four, “Judge William’s account of resolution in *Remarks on Marriage”* I add to this picture by taking a close look at a long passage in the Judge’s manuscript that describes the act of decision with which we marry.

In Chapter Five, “Marital love: William and his wife at tea” I write about the change that the advent of the resolution brings in a love relationship. In particular I focus on what William calls having a history. When we have a history, adherence to the customs and haunts of one’s shared life with So and so become expressions for the erotic love itself, and adversities and losses have meaning for us in relation to our resolution rather than as a competitor to it.

These concepts are so abstract here in the introduction that they may seem more mysterious than the paradox that they are supposed to address. By the time the reader has finished the dissertation my aim is that these will feel significantly more familiar and clear. And that they begin to bring into focus what is happening with the words “I will love and cherish her all the days of my life”.

4: The question of Kierkegaard's own views on marriage in relation to his pseudonym

When Kierkegaard put out a second edition of *Either/Or* in 1849, he drafted, though he declined to publish, the following:

> What if I wrote at the back of the second edition of *Either/Or*:
> 'Postscript: I hereby retract this book. It was a necessary deception in order, if possible, to deceive men into the religious, which has continually been my task all along. Maieutically it certainly has had its influence. Yet I do not need to retract it, for I have never claimed to be its author.'[13]

Even if Kierkegaard had not sprinkled his later works with statements like this one distancing himself from his pseudonyms, the question would naturally arise of how Kierkegaard's own ideas and sentiments on marriage relate to those of his creation Judge William. I will take a moment here in the introduction to address this question. To a large degree I will only be able to address it in a satisfactory way after I have got on the table what I think William says, and who William is, in the body of the dissertation. But I also think that if I lay out some things for the reader at the outset it may avoid quite a bit of

[13] Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers,* VI*,* trans. and ed. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1967) 6374 (*Pap.* X A 192), quoted in Edward Hong's "Historical Introduction" to Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part I,* trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987) xvii (hereafter EO I).

distraction, with a reader wondering where I stand on it.

Kierkegaard is, of course, not known primarily as an apologist for modern marriage. He is the philosopher who challenged his contemporaries understanding of their professed Christianity. He himself was engaged to be married but chose to break it off, and by his own account this was a decisive, formative moment in his vocation as a religious poet. In his attitude, psychology, and person, he cannot be William. Furthermore, as Kierkegaard unfolds his system over the course of his fourteen years as a writer of philosophy, he organizes his account of human life with a hierarchy of "existence spheres", which he also calls "stages": the esthetic, the ethical, and the religious. The married man exists in the ethical sphere, but it was the religious that Kierkegaard was called on to evangelize. The religious life is the highest life, and religiousness is what Kierkegaard thought of as the *telos* of his pseudonymous writings. In *The Point of View for my Life as an Author* (1851)*,* Kierkegaard claims that even as early as *Either/Or,* he conceived of his written work with this trajectory toward the religious in mind, though he admits may not have fully understood it.[14] Kierkegaard refers to the "esthetic works", which includes both the esthetic and ethical parts of *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way,* as "deceptions", and the process of writing them as, for him personally, "an emptying" (POV 35). In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* he writes in his own name "Thus in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me. I have no opinion about them except as a third party, no knowledge of their meaning except as a reader, not the remotest private relation to them, since it is

[14] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998) 93 (hereafter POV).

impossible to have that to a doubly reflected communication." (CUP, 626).[15]
He also writes there, confoundingly, that everything is "revoked" (CUP, 619). He says of the defense of marital love in *Either/Or,* "Personally, I was far from tranquilly wanting to summon existence back to marriage, I who religiously was already in the monastery—an idea concealed in the pseudonym [of the editor of *Either/Or] Victor—Eremita."* (POV, 35). Two months after publishing *Either/Or,* Kierkegaard published the religious tract *Two Upbuilding Discourses.* Later Kierkegaard claimed that the real opposition, the real choice, was not between the ethical and esthetic, not between "A" and "B" of *Either/Or*, but between *Either/Or* as a whole and *Two Upbuilding Discourses.* (POV, 36).[16]

The question of this thesis is: what does it mean to commit to continue to love someone, as we do in a modern marriage? In light of these statements and others, it seems entirely possible that what Kierkegaard really thought on this topic is different from the position taken by the Judge.

What is worth saying first (though it is not all I wish to say), is that this is a question that in a sense lies outside the boundaries of this thesis and its aims. The primary aim here is not to comprehend the ultimate position of the philosopher Kierkegaard, but to ask "what can it mean to commit to love someone?" I want to uncover what, in

[15] Toward the end of his life, writing his stentorian essays in *The Moment* attacking Christendom, Kierkegaard appears to take the extreme Pauline position that to follow Christ and be a Christian requires the renunciation of family life. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, trans and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998) 186, 245-48.

[16] This is also supposed to be one of the differences between *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way. Stages* has not two parts but three: an esthetic and ethical stage, and a religious stage. As Johannes Climacus puts it, "The inadequacy of *Either/Or* is simply that the work ended ethically, as has been shown. In *Stages* this has been made clear, and the religious is maintained in its place." (CUP, 294).

Kierkegaard's work, could contribute to an answer. Nor am I looking for what Kierkegaard or his pseudonyms thought of the highest life. I am looking for an account of marital love. What I hope will become very clear is that in Kierkegaard's larger, life-long project, there is to be found, imbedded in the early work, a brilliant piece of phenomenological psychology regarding the place of decision in married love. Kierkegaard pleads "If it should occur to anyone to want to quote a particular passage from the books, it is my wish, my prayer, that he will do me the kindness of citing the respective pseudonymous author's name, not mine. [. . .] " (CUP, 627). I will be careful to respect his wishes. It is conceivable that I will draw out an account of the nature of marriage that Kierkegaard himself did not ultimately hold; and yet, if this does happen, the thesis would not thereby be guilty of misreading, so long as it has been accurate when it comes to his pseudonym William. It is William that we will focus on; even if, for Kierkegaard, this was meant as a step on a longer path.[17]

[17] There are very few academic treatments that attempt to reconstruct William's argument about marriage in any detail. This may be because readers have understood it to be a sort of stepping stone on the journey to understanding William's more high-altitude remarks on the ethical and esthetic in his second letter. Furthermore the latter, in turn, is seen as a mere way station on the road to understanding Kierkegaard's more exalted work on religiousness. But it would, perhaps, chagrin Kierkegaard that this was why the first letter was passed over. Clearly he put it there so that the reader would work through that first.

In this vein, it is worth noting that Judge William himself is not opposed to looking at his writings as a preparatory step on the way to religiousness. The Judge, for example, writes in *Reflections on Marriage* "I do not say, then, that marriage is the highest life; I know a life that is higher, but woe to the person who gratuitously wants to leap over it. It is in this narrow pass that I choose my checkpoint in order, if I may say so, to inspect in thought those who want to slip past." (SLW, 169). In many places Kierkegaard indicates that we've got to understand the relationship between the esthetic and the ethical before we can appreciate the leap of faith into religiousness (e.g. CUP, 258). So it may be that this dissertation can serve as an aid to understanding Kierkegaard's work on religiousness, either for its author or its reader, even though this will not be dealt with directly here. In taking a close look at modern marriage, persons who are not very religious (such as myself) can vividly encounter the paradoxical idea of

There is, however, one form of this worry over Kierkegaard's relationship to his pseudonyms that I think should be on our minds from the outset as accurate readers; and it is worth addressing (to some degree) right now. A large part of providing a close reading of a complex philosophical body of work such as Judge William's account of marriage is that one is constantly asking how statement A fits with statement B into a harmonious whole, and how A, B, and everything else can be interpreted in such a way as to seem most plausible. Where one has to provide one's own links and glosses, one gives the best explanation one can under the assumption that the texts do form one such coherent, complete whole. In this respect, one reads as generously as possible. It is in relation to this generosity that a troubling thought arises in light of Kierkegaard's professed personal distance from his pseudonym. It is: What if the work wasn't meant to hang together cleanly? What if Kierkegaard himself has sewn fallacies and inconsistencies and other mistakes into Judge William's argument, with the ultimate aim that through the detection of this incoherence his reader can come to see and experience

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love as a duty. That loving should become a duty is something Kierkegaard thought was the central challenge of Christian life, and the strangeness at its core. As William sees it, the Christian revolution in moral philosophy (and with it the revolution in marriage) consisted in this change: to love becomes the sole, fundamental duty of a human life. As Judge William puts it toward the end of his first letter, "The duty is only one thing: it is to love in truth, in one's inmost heart; and duty is just as protean as love itself and pronounces everything holy and good if it is of love and inveighs against everything, however beautiful and deceptive it is, that is not of love." (EO II, 148). "Duty is always consonant with love." (EO II, 149). Today although everyone says that much in our moral outlook comes out of our Christian heritage, this Christian thought that our only duty is to love is not really on the scene as a competing theory on the nature of moral action in academic philosophy. It is my understanding that Kierkegaard thought that he could best begin to reveal this way of thinking through the concept of marriage, and it is my experience that the strategy can be successful for a willing reader.

the limits of the ethical point of view? In that case generosity might not be the right way to proceed in understanding what wisdom there is in the work. The way to study it, rather, would be, in part, to be on the lookout for the ways in which William's thoughts *don't* add up. Maybe this inadequacy is what we're actually meant to appreciate and get a feel for by reading *Either/Or* and the esthetic and ethical parts of *Stages on Life's Way*. The subtitle to *Either/Or* is "A Fragment of Life". A fragment is a broken off part of a whole. Surely we should be careful lest we toil and puzzle over problems in this text because we treat it as a whole, when really it can only be edifying when we come to appreciate that it is a fragment.

This troubling thought is made worse when we consider what sort of person William himself says he is. William says that his motto, attributed to Gorgias, is: "The deceived is wiser than the one not deceived" (SLW, 88).[18] This with no more ado brings up what I think is the main question a reader is meant to contemplate about William as a person: Is William living a lie? When we read his defenses of marriage, that marriage is the only way to preserve erotic love, are we witnessing the elaborate labors of a bourgeois married man's avoidance of the truth?[19]

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[18] In contrast to Johannes the Seducer, remarks in his speech in *In Vino Veritas* (the first part of *Stages on Life's Way),* "What a sensual pleasure it is to enjoy the deception without being deceived*,* only the devotee of erotic love understands." (SLW, 79).

[19] That William is in fact self-deceived is the thesis of Jeffrey Turner. Turner reads William's letters to A as attempts to prop up his own insecurities about the true boredom of his life and his marriage. Turner thinks that the whole point is that the reader of *Either/Or* is supposed to see this: "Judge William takes such pains to show A that he is not in despair about his marriage, that he is filled with "confident joy" (EO II, 31) as he writes about his own marriage, in short, that his marriage is the normative example— that one really can't help but wonder: Why all these proofs? Why all this rejoicing and shouting, this "confident joy"?" Jeffrey Turner, "To Tell a Good Tale: Kierkegaardian Reflections on Moral Narrative and Moral Truth", in John Davenport. and Anthony Rudd

Toward the beginning of *The Esthetic Validity of Marriage*, William reflects on his task in writing what he admits is becoming more of a manuscript than a letter:

> No matter how many painful confusions life can still manifest, I fight for two things: the enormous task of showing that marriage is the transfiguration of the first love and not its annihilation, is its friend and not its enemy; and for the task— to everyone else so very insignificant but to me all the more important— of showing that my humble marriage has had this meaning, whereby strength and courage are gained for the continual accomplishment of this task. (EO II, 31).

The first 'task' William describes here is the sort of thing we expect any author of an argument to undertake. William believes that marriage is a "transfiguration of first love" and need not be seen as antithetical to it. But the latter part of this sentence, that he writes with the aim of showing that *his* marriage "has had this meaning", so that "courage is gained" *by him* to go on in his marriage—this is the sort of thing that someone says in all innocence, when they involuntary lets slip what is actually animating them, and the real reason that they take their view of the subject.[20] It makes us wonder (it seems meant to

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(eds.), *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001). Kindle.

[20] There is a similar moment of ambiguity at the end of *Stages,* when William writes, "What I do know definitely, however— something that shrewdness no more than mockery, no more than the terror of these deliberations, can wrench away from me— is the happiness of my marriage, or, more correctly, my conviction of the happiness of

make us wonder): Is William is trying to find the truth? Or is William trying to prop up his own belief in marriage so that he can tolerate carrying on in it? William goes on and one about how his marriage has accomplished the preservation of erotic love. But is William capable of actually appraising his feelings for what they are? Does he know his heart? Kierkegaard sets things up so that one must wonder about William in the same way that one wonders, I think, about any conventional married person who blithely expresses his self-satisfaction a little too often. He is a cartoon version of the person whose somewhat suspicious conformity, somewhat suspicious conviction in the rightness of a traditional form of life, seems ultimately motivated by his need for a sense of security, or to drive away his regrets and resentments.

In *Remarks on Marriage* William makes his stubbornness when it comes to the topic of marriage even more plain. There, in fact, he begins by remarking that the true task of every husband—including himself—is to have faith in marriage. William claims that marriage revolves around little things that become something significant, but only

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marriage." (SLW, 183). We seem to have two completely different things here—the happiness of one man's marriage, and a conviction of the happiness of married life more generally. William writes as though they are two sides of the same coin. Yet surely a man could be convinced of the latter, and yet not happy. And a man could himself be happy, and yet not convinced.

One wants to interject: but which of these things is it really? Does William know he has a happy marriage, or does he only know that he possesses a certain conviction of the happiness of the married state? Or does this sentence actually depict a man, say, at his desk backing off from an assertion even as he writes it? (That is, does William begin by writing that he knows definitely of his happiness and then, mid-sentence, in a spasm of self-doubt, feel that he needs to add a comma, an "or", and then speak "more correctly" about what he at any rate honestly can say: that he knows he has a conviction of the happiness of the married state?) Yet William doesn't seem to be stumbling. He by all appearances is in a sort of ecstasy. Rather (though no less mysteriously), he seems instead to regard the clause that comes after the "or" to be a sort of clarification of the former—*as though the conviction of the happiness of marriage were the true force behind the real happiness he enjoys.*

"for the believer".

> Then, too, all these little things have the remarkable characteristic that nothing can be evaluated in advance, nothing worked out in a rough plan; but while the understanding stands still and the imagination is on a wild-goose chase and calculation calculates wrongly and sagacity despairs, the married life goes along and is transformed from glory unto glory, the insignificant becomes more and more significant by a miracle— for the believer. But a believer one must be, and a married man who is not a believer is a tiresome character, a real household pest. [….]
>
> Ordinarily we speak only of a married man's unfaithfulness, but what is just as bad is a married man's lack of faith. Faith is all that is required, and faith compensates for everything. Just let understanding and sagacity and sophistication reckon, figure out, and describe how a married man ought to be: there is only one attribute that makes him lovable, and that is faith, absolute faith in marriage. Just let experience in life try to define exactly what is required of a married man's faithfulness; there is only one faithfulness, one honesty that is truly lovable and hides everything in itself, and that is the honesty toward God and his wife and his married estate in refusing to deny the miracle.
>
> This is also my consolation when I choose to write about

> marriage, for while I disclaim any other competence, I do claim just one— conviction. (SLW, 90-91).

A reader will approach *Either/Or* as a journey in self-understanding. But what are the prospects for our own self-understanding when our guide is so willful in his judgments, and even seems resolved to be so? Is this the significance of his name? William never claims to love the truth. Apparently to the contrary, he expresses a distaste for people who rely too much on their understanding, our faculty of judgment.[21] He never claims to have an open mind. Instead, as he says here, his credential is his conviction. "My conviction, then, is my one and only justification, and in turn the guarantee for my firm conviction is the weight of the responsibility under which my life, like every married man's life, is placed." (SLW, 91). Surely we have reason to be suspicious of someone's ability to speak sense on a subject when he says that he has an unshakeable faith in it, that he isn't willing to doubt it, that he sets the greatest store in "refusing to deny the miracle." Kierkegaard seems to want us to be suspicious of Judge William in this way.

Perhaps this lack of interest in open inquiry is part of the reason that although Judge William's two eulogies to marriage are very direct in their intentions and often

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[21] For example: "As soon as the understanding wants to try to explain or think through love, the ludicrousness of it becomes apparent, something that is best expressed by saying that understanding becomes ludicrous." (SLW, 120). See also EO II 31, 197. Related to this, I scrutinize William's remarks on what he calls reflection in detail in Chapter Three.

William also says he hopes that the reader will refrain from criticizing the work, "for a married man who writes about marriage writes least of all to be criticized." (SLW, 94). William writes that his aim is to convince "one individual", and says, rather alarmingly, that "to spirit away those who speak against [marriage] is my intention" (SLW, 95). Not to convince or contradict but to 'spirit away' his opponents: to remove them without his reader noticing.

beautiful in their celebration of the institution; the analytical account, the positive argument, is highly obscure. The text is difficult, drafty, jumpy, thick with the terminology of 19th century Germanic philosophy, and contains an almost constant stream of what can seem at first like bald fallacies. William constantly seems to be saying "Now that I have proved such and such...", but when the reader leafs back through the text there appears to be no such proof.

Thus the way William's character is drawn, as well as the style and feel of his argument, might make us worried that the way to read his works is not with generosity, but to be on the lookout for the mistakes he might be making when he puts his own emotional needs above the truth.

To a large extent, as I say, the question of whether we should approach William's argument with the assumption that it forms a coherent whole can't be answered until we've actually tried. These considerations of William's own motives and personality in particular are things that need to emerge in the body of this thesis, in light of his theories. The topic of William and his conviction, in particular, will be taken up in detail in Chapter Two. My method in the thesis in general will be is to explore the way in which the pseudonymity relates to the teachings on marriage in the course of a close reading of the argument itself.

A few things, however, may make the reader feel that the policy of generosity is worth trying. Perhaps most tellingly, Kierkegaard does not just write about marriage in his pseudonymous works. He also writes about marriage in works to which he signs his own name. Kierkegaard's discourse *On the Occasion of a Wedding*, for example, was

published the day before *Stages on Life's Way*. In this discourse the argument that Kierkegaard advances in defense of marriage appears in all respects identical to the one Judge William makes in *Either/Or* and *Stages*. The account is shorter and simpler, and focuses on the Biblical expression that "Love conquers everything"[22]; but the argument has the same basic shape. Kierkegaard writes, "What is so plain and precise and distinct as a person's duty is and ought to be, and what is so puzzling as the prompting of love—and yet here love is to become a duty!" (OOW 43). In *On the Occasion of a Wedding* we see Kierkegaard articulating the same issue that William is concerned with, and we find the same solution to it, articulated with some of the same themes and terms.

> The resolution of marriage is that love conquers everything. Yes, it conquers everything, but it does perish in adversity if no resolution holds it firm, it degenerates in the everyday if no resolution encourages it, it is stifled in imagined importance if no resolution humbles it. Erotic love remains, but the resolution is its abiding place, whereby it has its continuance; erotic love is the refreshing volatile element, but the resolution is the vessel in which it is sustained. (OOW, 62).

The existence of *On the Occasion of a Wedding* is one very compelling reason to think that Kierkegaard's own views on marriage may actually be well represented by the

[22] Søren Kierkegaard, *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993) 46 (hereafter OOW).

Judge. Something else to consider is that although Kierkegaard is at pains to distance himself "personally", as he puts it, from the Judge as an author, as I have quoted above, nowhere (as far as I am aware) in *The Point of View for my Work as an Author, Postscript,* or the journals, does Kierkegaard indicate that William was incorrect about what he has to say. Instead Kierkegaard boasts in his journal that he "has written one of the most inspired defenses of marriage."[23]

The idea that Judge William's works were written in order to be overcome analytically might make us overlook a deeper point Kierkegaard is making about the distance between himself and his pseudonym. Perhaps Kierkegaard did think and feel differently about marriage than William, but not in the sense that William has such and such a theory, for example, on the nature of married love, and Kierkegaard thinks that he got it wrong. Perhaps, rather, whatever it is to advance through the "stages", it is not to see weaknesses in the logic of the lower stages, or an internal incoherency or incompleteness, as the dialectical method can sometimes work in other great texts of philosophy. It is something else, something more personal and, as Kierkegaard would say, inward. The arguments William puts forward *belong to William* in a way that they cannot belong to Kierkegaard, and this is not entirely a matter of what one or the other thinks is true. One theme of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is that Kierkegaard writes with pseudonyms to prevent his reader from treating the difference between the esthetic and ethical spheres as a matter of understanding. He considered it the misfortune

[23] Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers,* X, B 115. Quoted in Gregor Malantschuk, *The Controversial Kierkegaard,* trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1978) 45.

of his contemporaries that they know too much, and mistake understanding for existence. What I am suggesting is that perhaps what Kierkegaard is disavowing when he writes that "in the pseudonymous works that is not a single word by me", is not that, for example, William develops an account of married love that is actually junk. It is something else. He means that in another way (a way that it is the education of the esthetic writings to learn) the meaning and validity of these thoughts belongs to that pseudonym and not himself.

So considering what Kierkegaard says, I believe that a generous, close reading is worth attempting. I will also add that from a general, methodological point of view, this is a relief. In a sense, I believe it is not possible to read closely without reading generously. To read closely to, in large part, to relate the text to itself, sentence by sentence. To read closely means that the meaning of the work unfolds from within, rather than from the imposition of a set of assumptions about what it must say from without—and that even goes for assumptions about its author. We neither come with pre-established conclusions, nor do we read in a sort of semi-suspense, knowing that later the work will be "revoked".

Chapter One: First Love

> There is no people or civilization that does not possess poems, songs, legends, or tales in which the anecdote or the plot—the myth, in the original meaning of the word—is the encounter of two persons, their mutual attraction, and the labors and hardships they must overcome to be united. Their encounter requires, in turn, two contradictory conditions: the attraction that the lovers experience must be involuntary, born of a secret and all-powerful magnetism; at the same time, it must be a choice. In love, predestination and choice, objective and subjective, fate and freedom intersect.
>
> -Octavio Paz, *The Double Flame*[1]

> Only the first is love; the second proves by the change not to be love— and therefore not to have been love either. The point is that one cannot cease to be loving; if one is truly loving, then one remains that; if one ceases to *be* that, then one never *was* that. So, with regard to love, ceasing has a retroactive power. Yes, I can never become weary of saying this and of pointing out that wherever love is present there is something infinitely profound. For example, a man may have had money, and when it is gone, when he no longer has money, it still remains just as certain and true that he *has had* money. But when one ceases to be loving, *he has never been loving either*.
>
> -Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*[2]

1: Judge William's approach to erotic love

The first part of Judge William's *Esthetic Validity of Marriage* can seem bewildering because there are so many technical terms, and no guide to what any of them mean. Just considering love itself, William writes of erotic love, earthly love, lust, falling in love,

[1] Octavio Paz, *The Double Flame: Love and Eroticism,* trans. Helen Lane (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1995) 33.

[2] WL, 303.

first love, an opposition between romantic and reflective love, and spiritual love. Then there is his target: married love, the phenomenon that he wants to explain and eulogize for his reader. William writes as though his reader already knows what all these terms refer to, how they differ, as well as whether any of them overlap. It is, however, possible to sort these out to some degree from William's scattered remarks, and it will be worth our while to do so at the outset here.

As I understand it, in William's account of marriage the central concept, and the basic emotional force, is erotic love. In a way, in his writings on marriage William is always writing about erotic love in the various forms he thinks it takes. Married love is one of these forms. He writes, "The first thing I have to do is to orient myself and especially you in the defining characteristics of what a marriage is. Obviously the real constituting element, the substance, is […] erotic love." (EO II, 32).[3] William's purpose is to show how marriage is the preservation and perfection, rather than the ruination, of erotic love.

Erotic love is a species of earthly love (EO II, 61)[4]. William says that earthly love is love that involves a preference for a particular person. This is how earthly love differs from spiritual love, or, synonymously, Christian love, the sort of love we are supposed to have for our neighbor that does not consist in any preference, any particular attraction or regard.[5] William expresses deference for spiritual love, but it is not really his subject in

[3] See also EO II, 35.

[4] The other species is friendship, though William never addresses the difference between erotic love and friendship directly.

[5] Hong and Hong translate the word *Kjaerlighed* as either 'love' or 'earthly love'. Translating *Kjaerlighed* as 'love' is problematic because it gives the impression that

his writings. Aside from this, the only one of the above terms that is not some form of earthly love is lust. What distinguishes all love from lust is that love "bears a stamp of eternity." (EO II, 21), as we will see.

Erotic love itself is never the object of William's direct definition or analysis, other than when he remarks that we enter erotic love when we fall for the beloved by beholding her beauty (EO II, 19)[6]. William never enumerates the things that erotic love consists in, nor stops to sketch its features. Instead, it is through writing about romantic and reflective love, first love and marital love, that William explores erotic love. Romantic love and reflective love are two ways of interpreting erotic love. They are sometimes treated as cultural phenomena particular to a time and place, but essentially they are points of view, theories, ways of understanding (and thus, William thinks, of shaping) one's own experiences. Although each of them, in its own way, has some grasp of the truth, ultimately William will reject both the romantic and reflective points of view on erotic love. First love, on the other hand, has a very different status for William. This is an element in William's own original interpretation of the true nature of erotic love.

Kjaerlighed is the most general concept, including under itself all forms of love, including spiritual love. In fact William draws a distinction between *Kjaerlighed* (earthly love) and spiritual love (EO II, 62).

William writes, for example, "If I do have any understanding of the whole subject, the defect in earthly love [*Kjaerlighed*] is the same as its merit— that it is preference. Spiritual love has no preference and moves in the opposite direction, continually sheds all relativities. " (EO II, 62). Spiritual love is the subject of Kierkegaard's upbuilding works, and in particular *Works of love.* In *Works of Love,* Kierkegaard echoes William's conception of the distinction: "Therefore the object of both erotic love and of friendship has preference's name, "the beloved," "the friend," who is loved in contrast to the whole world. The Christian doctrine, on the contrary, is to love the neighbor, to love the whole human race, all people, even the enemy, and not to make exceptions, neither of preference nor of aversion." (WL, 19).

[6] See also SWL, 139

(Though, confusingly, there are different interpretations of the phrase 'first love' in the romantic and reflective points of view as well, as we will see). On William's view, one cannot understand erotic love if one fails to see it as essentially developmental, and, in particular, as meant to follow a development from first love to marital love.

In this chapter our purpose is primarily to understand William's conception of first love, in other words erotic love as it exists in us before decision transforms it into a more mature marital love, and the lover undertakes what William calls "possession". In particular we need to understand William's account of how first love can be both fleeting and yet essentially eternal in character, or that, in William's words, it "bears a stamp of eternity". But to do this we will first need to put on the table his commentary on romantic and reflective love. We must undertake the latter because this is primarily how William chooses to construct his account. Kierkegaard sets up his argument in such a way that much of what he has to say about first love is entangled with his remarks on romantic and reflective love.[7] When, after his treatments of romantic and reflective love, William turns to his own beliefs and begins with the nature of first love, he starts to sketch the correct—and much more complex—interpretation of erotic love's "qualification of eternity", as it emerges dialectically out of the two ages.

Parts Two and Three of this chapter are devoted to the romantic and reflective

[7] There is also another reason for beginning here. One problem that William faces in articulating his theory and convincing A of his argument is that it sounds so banal—it is easy to mistake it for a much more superficial treatment. William's arguments around love's eternity in particular are such that they constantly threaten to be dismissed as unhelpful platitudes, especially by someone with A's disposition. The romantic conception of love really does consist in platitudes, and it is helpful to William to bring out the contrast between this unthoughtful, dim grasp of the nature of love, and his own account. Since my thesis must no doubt deal with this same issue, it behooves me to begin here too.

ages respectively. In Part Four, as I turn to William's conception of first love, I begin by taking a moment to try to explain why the phrase "first love" appears to refer to two different things at the same time. Then I turn to the analysis of first love itself. In Part Five I analyze the relation of first love to immediacy, in part by comparing what William says with the novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard's description of falling in love in the second volume of *My Struggle.* In Part Six I look at how first love relates to time and possibility, by performing a close reading of particular passage in which William's considers three analogies for first love.

2: The romantic age

As I've indicated, romantic love belongs to what William calls the "romantic age". William never says when exactly the romantic age begins and ends, but when he brings it up he almost always mentions knights, sometimes calling it "knightly love", and seems to want his reader to be thinking of the chivalrous love we know mainly form 13th to 17th century European art and literature. But William also indicates that 'romantic love' denotes an outlook, and is not limited to a particular period in history. William sees the romantic point of view manifested in his own time, for example, in novels and plays that dramatize protagonists struck with an undying, unyielding passionate love, who must, before the final act, overcome obstacles that stand in the way of the union (EO II, 18).[8]

[8] In this light, clearly the romantic mode is still very much alive in our culture. In the 19th century the obstacles to romantic love might be money, or marriage itself. The 20th or

In describing the romantic understanding of erotic love, William focuses on three ideas: romantic love is immediate, it is eternal, and it is situated in striving. First William writes of what he calls the immediacy of romantic love:

> But first I shall indicate the characteristics of romantic love. One could say in a single word: it is immediate. To see her and to love her would be one and the same, or even though she saw him but one single time through a crack in the shuttered window of a virgin's bower, she nevertheless would love him from that moment, him alone in the whole world. (EO II, 20).

The immediacy of erotic love is an important idea to Judge William throughout his writings.[9] By the end of this thesis, I hope that we will be able to illuminate, to some

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21st century romantic plot might, for example, pit true love against cultural taboos regarding class, religion, race, or sexual orientation.

[9] At least one commentator has been frustrated with the vagueness of Kierkegaard's term "immediate".* But in the case of *Either/Or* this may be deliberate. We in fact come to understand the immediacy of erotic love only gradually. For example, one very obvious way to read William's use of the term 'immediate' would be that erotic love is immediate inasmuch as the lover has not gone through the process of bringing before herself her reasons for loving. In other words, perhaps "immediacy" means apart from any act of refection. But as we read on in the William texts, this won't do. According to William, all forms of earthly love are immediate. (In *Works of Love,* Kierkegaard even indicates that this is an additional way, along with its preferentiality, that earthly love in general can be distinguished from spiritual love (WL, 143-144)). Marital love too is immediate, even though we come to marital love through reflection, and reflection is a day to day part of married life. (EO II, 56; SLW, 102, 157). Understanding how marital love can still be immediate even after it has become reflective will be one of central challenges of his account.

* See Norman Lillegard, "Thinking with Kiergaard and MacIntyre about the Aesthetic, Virtue, and Narrative", footnote 4. In John A. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (eds.), *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre:*

degree, William's contribution to understanding the relationship between erotic love, reasons, reflection, and immediacy. William will begin to give us a clearer picture of his own take on love's immediacy once he talks about love as a beginning(which I address in Part Five of this chapter). For now we are concerned with the romantic. The romantic puts the immediacy of love at the center of his conception, but what makes his conception romantic is that he interprets the immediacy of erotic love as a matter of the lack of conscious choice or control in the fact of his loving. As William puts it, "Romantic love manifests itself as immediate by exclusively resting in natural necessity." (EO II, 21). When William uses the phrase "natural necessity" he means what in the world (or in us) exists independently of our own free activity. "Necessity" stands in contradistinction to choosing. Everyone agrees that falling in love is a gift, not something we can will ourselves into. To a romantic, however, the love into which one falls is something that is and remains something suffered. In fact, to the romantic, it is proof of the power of the passion he bears that it is in command of him and always will be. The knight wails dramatically of being at his beloved's mercy because he has been conquered by her beauty and cannot do otherwise than obey her will.

This lack of conscious control is related to the second and, for our purposes, most important characteristic of the romantic age and the romantic interpretation of love. It is an essential characteristic of the romantic that he is convinced that his love is complete, and that it will last forever. "The lovers are deeply convinced that in itself their relationship is a complete whole that will never be changed." (EO II, 21). To the romantic, if love doesn't last forever, this just proves that it was not love after all. (EO II,

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Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue, (Chicago: Open Court, 2001). Kindle.

46). For the romantic, the idea of love's eternity has the same sense of necessity that marked her interpretation of erotic love's immediacy. Love is eternal in simple sense that *she is always going to love so and so.* It is true of her in the way someone might think that they will always be afraid of dogs. Its durability is not something that needs her activity or that she must achieve. William talks about how the romantic lovers have the tendency to think that they were "two beings [who] are intended for one another" (EO II, 20). Their love is, to use Goethe's metaphor of *Wahlverwandtshafften,* like a chemical affinity.[10] The fact that they met may have been accidental, but the affinity that inheres between the lovers' souls was always waiting there. Now that they have found each other, they will attract each other with the inexorability of chemistry.

William says that to the romantic, love is experienced as something suffered. But this does not mean that the lover is not busy. The third characteristic of romantic love is that to the romantic lover, love involves striving against adversity. William writes, "That which is true of the whole development, the genuinely esthetic, is that love is situated in striving, that this feeling is seen to be battling its way through an opposition." (EO II, 18). Romantic lovers cannot consummate their love (with one or another idea of what that would mean) because they must first overcome something standing in their way. They must do this through their love. Sometimes the beloved is tragically, permanently out of reach: she is married, she is the enemy king's daughter, etc.; nonetheless the romantic lover is energized by his love to throw himself against these circumstances and conditions, sometimes unto death. Indeed, William posits that the romantic lover has a

[10] Though William himself notes that Goethe's concept of elective affinity in his novel of the same name may be much more complex and interesting than the romantic's idea that the lovers are intended for each other. (EO II, 20).

need for such adversity. William writes that the knight's love has an "incredible need for incredible deeds." (EO II 118).

> In the first flash of love, [romantic love] quite naturally thinks that it cannot suffer troubles enough in order to gain possession of the beloved object—indeed, insofar as the dangers are not present, it is inclined to procure such dangers itself merely in order to conquer them. (EO II, 18).

In keeping with the idea that the love itself is a matter of natural necessity, what marks the romantic's idea of striving for love, in particular, is that *the obstacles are always external to the love itself.* The knight strives for his love in an "entirely external medium". (EO II, 28). One struggles with "trolls and monsters" (EO II, 18). One's own loving is never what one is struggling with, but is, rather, the spontaneous, given fact of the matter. What is most important for our purposes is this: to the romantic lover, the fact of being in love, the relationship, the vitality of the love itself, are themselves not seen as his task. These are not the focus of his efforts.

The three characteristics of romantic love taken together form the general trend in romantic views of love: although romantic love makes us very active, love itself, by which I mean the actual attachment, feeling, and drive, *is not taken to be constituted or caused by anything that the lover himself is deciding or doing or causing.* Indeed, to the romantic, it is the compulsiveness of his passion that proves its truth and exaltedness.

3: The reflective age

William begins his letter with a discussion of the romantic age in part because he thinks that A and his generation—members of the 'reflective age'—need to be understood (and to understand themselves) in light of the very real fatuity of the romantic point of view. The reflective age is a response to the falseness of the romantic age. The reflective age is, among other things, marked by an aloof, critical observation of others and themselves. And all a reflective individual has to do is step back and look around a little to see that the vaunted eternity of love, conceived as some sort of natural suffered fact, is almost always an illusion. In his essay *Rotation of Crops*, from Part 1 of *Either/Or,* for example, A advises:

> Never become involved in marriage. Married people pledge love for each other throughout eternity […] If, instead of saying "throughout eternity", the couple would say "until Easter, until next May Day", then what they say would make some sense, for then they would be saying something and also something they perhaps could carry out. (EO I, 296).

Put simply: the esthete observes that clearly it is *not* the nature of erotic love to last. Instead, when we really pay attention to what happens in love, we see that love is by nature episodic: it is born, it blooms, and eventually it withers and dies. Then the heart

does it all over again with someone else. The fact that love cannot last is part of A's broader outlook on human nature. *Rotation of Crops* posits boredom as a sort of relentless climatological condition of human life. According to A, we are creatures that cannot both stay focused on one thing and remain interested in it, which is why our fear of boredom is the one force that can reliably motivate a person to action. (EO I, 285).

Importantly, the observation that erotic love is meant to pass away does not lead the reflective age to reject erotic love or avoid it. According to William, members of the reflective age, with their consciousness of the changefulness of love, have their own way of integrating love into their lives. But this integration involves accomodating the fact that love is temporary. In the reflective age, love is understood and mastered, and best enjoyed, when, in William's words, "the instant becomes the main thing" (EO II, 22). In the reflective age, "The eternal in love becomes the object of ridicule; the temporal is retained, but the temporal is also refined in a sensuous eternity, in the eternal moment of the embrace." (EO II, 22).

William observes of A's character, "You hover above your self, and what you see down below you is a multiplicity of moods and conditions that you make use of in order to find interesting contacts with life." (EO II, 199). The reflective age, and A, in fact, adore the early intoxicated romantic days of a love affair.[11] So they seek to scoop that

[11] Interestingly A doesn't deny that when people fall in love it tends to *feel* like the love will last forever. But he has learned to regard such feelings as deceptive. As A writes,

> When two people fall in love with each other and sense that they are

intoxication up and savor it, then abandon it and move on to the next 'first' love (EO II, 46).[12] We will see later that one of Judge William's arguments to A is that enjoying the energy that comes from the idea of love's eternity without believing in that eternity is impossible.

What we've seen so far is that the romantic, for all his naivete and high ideals and activity, is above all characterized by viewing love as a matter of natural necessity, a given. Most importantly, the romantic is convinced that his love is eternal in the straightforward sense that he believes it will last forever. He regards this belief as a belief about a natural fact—as a fact that is not sustained by, and in no way consists in, his choosing. A rejects this romantic point of view insofar as he rejects the idea that erotic love is eternal and believes, instead, that it is by nature transient. In this, A thinks that he's leaving behind the naivety of the romantic and the romantic's belief in "eternal

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> destined for each other, it is a question of having the courage to break it off, for by continuing there is only everything to lose, nothing to gain. It seems to be a paradox, and indeed it is, for the feelings, not for the understanding. (EO I, 298).

That is, as A sees it perhaps the human heart will always pipe up with its specious notion that this love will endure, that this love is one's destiny. The heart will over and over make the lover feel that this is the one and only person he ever truly loved—this idea is somehow part of what it is like to fall in love. But to A this is like the way that teenagers think that no harm can come to them, an overconfidence endemic to a particular period or vicissitude of life. It is a belief that goes with the territory, and has no basis in reality.

[12] The reflective age also has its way of assimilating marriage. But characteristically, it does so in such a way that love is left an entirely separate matter. It manages this in two ways. On the one hand, the reflective age can assimilate marriage by reverting to an older way of understanding the institution: the marriage of convenience that doesn't depend on love for its legitimacy (EO II, 27). Alternatively, the reflective age attempts to accommodate the fleetingness of erotic love by experimenting with the idea of a temporary marriage. (EO II, 23).

love", and that he is engaging in a more mature way of thinking.

As I understand it, part of William's strategy early on in *Esthetic Validity of Marriage* is to show that the romantic and reflective points of view have more in common than A realizes. William too, in his way, rejects romantic love and the romantic's conviction that his love will last forever. William never contradicts A's observation that erotic love, interpreted in the way that the romantic does, has a tendency to erode with time and the thickly lived life of a real relationship. Instead his first move in making this argument is to *reject the point of view that sees erotic love as something suffered*, an attitude that A unwittingly adopts. William believes that true decision and commitment can transform love into something that is not transient. And it can do this precisely because of the "qualification of eternity" that first love always already has in it, something that the romantic dimly grasped. William writes, "Although this [romantic] love is based essentially on the sensuous, it nevertheless is noble by virtue of the consciousness of the eternal that it assimilates, for it is this that distinguishes all love from lust: that it bears a stamp of eternity." (EO II, 21). The "stamp of eternity" is something that makes erotic love what it is, and gives it its inner fire. But the stamp of eternity is not to be understood as the romantic does. William begins to develop his alternative understanding of the eternity of erotic love by giving an account of first love.

4: Two meanings of the phrase "first love"

I mentioned earlier that the beginning of *The Esthetic Validity of Marriage* can feel

bewildering because of all the overlapping terms. Something else that can be confusing about the early parts of William's first letter is that when William uses the phrase "first love" it is so unclear what he means by it. The problem isn't just that the things that he says about first love are hard to grasp (though that is certainly also the case). The problem is that it is hard to determine what the phrase 'first love' even refers to. In particular, there seem to be two very different things that William could refer to by the phrase. On the one hand, "first love" could refer to the first particular person one was ever in love with. This is more or less what the phrase means in English today. It is one's first love in the sense of "My first love was my high-school sweetheart, Ginny." This seems to be what William is thinking of when he, for example, writes of his own wife: "There is one thing for which I thank God with my whole soul, and that is that she is the only one I have ever loved, the first, and there is one thing for which I pray to God with my whole heart, that He will give me the strength never to want to love any other." (EO II, 9). Or when he writes, "One loves only once in one's life-; the heart clings to its first love—marriage." (EO II, 64).[13] On the other hand, however, "first love" could refer to the first stage of a love relationship that undergoes changes through time. As William's account of marriage goes on, 'first love' is clearly meant to indicate the latter, the early times, the "first flash of love", as William sometimes calls it, when individuals are swept up in erotic excitement, occasioned by an encounter with beauty (EO II, 17). "It is a beautiful time, from the very first intimation of love, the first glimpse and the first disappearance of the beloved object, the first chord in this voice, the first glance, the first handshake, the first kiss—right up to the first perfect assurance of its possession." (EO II,

[13] William makes a similar statement in his *Remarks on Marriage* at SLW, 132.

126). But this latter meaning of the phrase 'first love' appears to be a very different, and logically independent, concept from the former. In principle, one should think, one could be in "first love" in the sense of early love even if this is were the 2nd or 3rd or 4th individual one had fallen for. And one could presumably enter a later, more mature stage of love in relation to the 1st person one ever loved.

We are tipped off that this apparent ambiguity may not be an accident when William says that the indeterminacy of the term 'first love', which he calls "cryptic", is itself significant. "The meaning this phrase has for the single individual is actually decisive for his whole intellectual-spiritual condition, just as the absence of any meaning whatever for him is sufficient to show that his soul is not predisposed to be moved or shaken by something higher." (EO II, 39). A reader of *Either/Or Part 1* in fact will know that the former meaning, that this is the first person one has loved, is what the romantic hears in the phrase. The reflective personality, on the other hand, focuses on the first love in the sense of the intoxicated early days of an affair.[14] (Like, for example, the first six

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[14] A reader of *Either/Or* first encounters the dialectic of the romantic and reflective views of first love in a sort of review essay, *The First Love*, written by A, on Augustine Eugene Scribe's contemporary play of the same name. Scribe's play centers on a character named Emmeline. Emmeline is in the grip of a romantic ideal of love: she thinks that one experiences true love only once, the first time one loves. As A sums up the theory, "That it is possible to love more than once is admitted, of course, but the first love is essentially different from every other." (EO I, 254). Even one's first love cannot be realized, it will always be the true passion of one's life. A calls this Emmeline's "romantic orthodoxy" (EO I, 254). In her own case, Emmeline believes that she is in love with her cousin, even though she hasn't seen him since she was eight years old. In the course of Scribe's play we are shown Emmeline clinging more and more desperately to this theory, even as her cousin turns out to be a rake, not to mention married. At the end of the play Emmeline finally appears to have had a change of heart. She declares that she now instead loves someone else (the play's protagonist), and in the last lines, referring to her old feelings for her cousin, she declares "It was a mistake. I confused the past with the future" (EO I, 255).

As A sees it in his review essay, it is all too easy to interpret *The First Love* as though Scribe was giving us a sort of coming of age story, in which case it would be a simple criticism of infatuation. According to this interpretation of the play, Emmeline has herself learned a lesson about young love: its shallowness and strange stubbornness; and in the end she has given up her naive ideas about the significance of the first time that one experiences love. A, however, thinks that this reading of the play is mistaken. It doesn't do justice to Scribe's genius. To interpret Emmeline as having reformed from her romantic views is to misunderstand the nature of the romantic way of thinking. No—as the curtain closes Emmeline is still very much in the grips of her romantic theory of first love. She just claims that her new love is the true first! A writes,

> For the thesis that the first love is the true love is very convenient and can be of service to people in many ways. If one is not so fortunate as to obtain what one wishes, there is still the sweetness of the first love. If one is so unfortunate as to love several times, each time is nevertheless the first time. In other words the thesis is a sophistical thesis. If one loves for a third time, one says: My present love is, nevertheless, my first true love, but the true love is the first—ergo this third love is my first. The sophistry consists in this, that the category the first is supposed to be a qualitative and a numerical category simultaneously. When a widower and a widow combine forces and each brings along five children, they nevertheless assure each other on the wedding day that this love is their first love. (EO I, 254).

Emmeline fits the description William gives of the romantic lover. Emmeline is romantic not just because she falls in love easily and hard. She is romantic because she lacks reflection, both in the simple sense that she cannot seem to see her own story for what it is (a case of falling in love two times); and in the sense that she fails to appreciate analytically the equivocation at the heart of her theory of love itself. Correspondingly, one can see in A's reaction the characteristics of the reflective age as it is sketched by William: it separates out what it takes to be a confusion in the romantic's thinking, and dispassionately observes the facts.

Because the reflective age rejects the idea of eternal love, and in general is skeptical of the longevity of love affairs, to the reflective sensibility, when "first love" is spoken in the biographical sense of the first person that one fell in love with, there is no magic in it. Instead the phrase has a comic or cynical ring to it. The phrase "first love" draws attention to the seriality of passionate love. To A's ear, someone speaking sentimentally of "first love" is comic in the way to a husband might introduce his wife to someone by saying: "Allow me to introduce my first wife." What A is much more interested in is "first love" in the sense of the jubilant early days when we've just fallen in love, the period of intensity and infatuation when love is new. To A, indeed, this stage could come upon an individual as many times as she falls in love—as in fact happens in the case of Emmeline (though she doesn't realize it). In fact, A relies on this repetition. Essentially, according to A, when Emmeline is certain of the unique power of first love

months, which is what Johannes the Seducer says is the proper length of a love affair) (EO I, 368).

But what does William himself mean? What does William hear (and intend) in the phrase 'first love'? William, as I understand it, hears in the phrase 'the first love' a higher synthesis of these two meanings. For William, every true love must always also be the first time one has loved, because every love reinterprets the whole of one's existence and invests it with new meaning. The two meanings of the 'first' are the two related poles of William's understanding of erotic love: that it is essentially developmental, and that it exists by reinventing one's self-understanding. The rest of this chapter will be taken up with trying to illuminate William's conception of first love.

5: First love: immediacy

The Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard writes in the second volume of his autobiographical novel *My Struggle* about what happened to him when he fell in love

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she is in fact immersed in the intensity and naive conviction that is the hallmark of all new love. Emmeline herself has no use for the idea of new love, because in her naivete and enthusiasm she thinks that her love will always stay the same—bearing out the main characteristic of romantic age sketched above that, in William's words, "The lovers are deeply convinced that in itself their relationship is a complete whole that will never be changed." (EO II, 21). To the reflective sensibility, on the other hand, new love is the only sense of "first love" that matters.

William seeks to revive the truth in what A takes to be Emmeline's naive equivocation. Every love is one's first love, because it is the nature of erotic love to reinterpret all of one's existence in light of itself. Every love is always an unprecedented first. Kierkegaard writes in *Works of Love,* "[E]rotic love and earthly love are the joy of life, so that the happy person truthfully says, 'Now I am living for the first time'" (WL, 150). See also WL, 303.

with his second (and current) wife Linda. The things that he writes couldn't be more cliché. But they are set down in his very direct and straight style, which is why *My Struggle* is useful to ground this thesis's discussion of first love, which gets such a high-altitude treatment in William's texts.

Karl Ove first meets Linda at a seminar for writers when he is in his thirties, and married to someone else. His feelings for Linda come on him suddenly and seemingly out of nowhere. He writes of the first time he sees her: "She was thin and beautiful. She had an aura that was dark, wild, erotic, and destructive. I dropped everything I was holding."[15] The second time he encounters Linda "...there was something about her I wanted, the second I saw her, it was there." It was "A kind of explosion". (MS II, 190). For the five days of the seminar Karl Ove thinks about Linda the whole time, and cannot sleep. Everything is euphoric to him during this time, and he writes well there, "as though I was in touch with a spring, something all my own and yet foreign to me gushed up, clear and fresh." (MS II, 191). While he is in this elated state he sees everything differently. "All the greenery that grew, I saw how wild and chaotic it was, yet how plain and clear the shapes were, and it evoked a sense of ecstasy in me, the old oak trees, the wind blowing through the foliage, the sun, the endless blue sky." (MS II 194). "I didn't sleep, barely ate, and I drank every night, nonetheless I was not tired or hungry and had no difficulty participating in the course."(MS II, 194). Karl Ove is old enough and experienced enough to recognize that this is all a bit ludicrous—he reflects that his feelings are the feelings of a sixteen-year-old. (MS II, 193). He is bewildered by his own

[15] Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Book 2,* trans. Don Bartlett (New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 2013) 175 (hereafter MS II).

emotions, remembering that he has a wife back home. "What sort of madness was this? I thought as I walked. I was married, we were fine, soon we would be buying a flat together. Then I came here and wanted to wreck everything? I did." (MS II, 197).

At the time of the seminar Linda does not reciprocate Karl Ove's passion. On the night Karl Ove realizes this he cuts his face all over with a broken glass. Later, Karl Ove abandons his wife of eight years and moves to Stockholm, where Linda lives (though in the book, remarkably, this is never presented as his reason for moving there). They meet up, have coffee a few times and go to see a play. Before they have become a couple he writes her a letter (one he never sends) that shares his feelings and says all the things that he can't stop noticing about her. He writes about her face, her laugh, her way of walking, the words she uses. "I wrote that all this was what I had seen, and that I didn't know her at all, had no idea what ran through her mind and very little about how she saw the world and the people in it, but that what I could see was enough, I knew I loved her and always would." (MS II, 219). He writes, "I hope you don't take this amiss. I'm just trying to say it as it is. I love you. That is how it is. And somewhere I always will, regardless of what happens to us." (MS II, 220).

Quickly they do in fact become a couple, and this time his state of euphoria lasts the whole summer.

> For the first time in my life I was completely happy. For the first time there was nothing in my life that could overshadow the happiness I felt. We were together constantly, suddenly reaching for each other at traffic lights, across a restaurant table, on buses, in

> parks, there were no demands or desires except for each other. I felt utterly free, but only with her, the moment we were apart I began to have yearnings. It was strange, the forces were so strange, and they were good. Geir and Christina said we were impossible to be with, we had eyes only for each other, and it was true, there was no world beyond the one we had built. On midsummer's night we went to the island of Runmarö where Mikaela had rented a cabin, I found myself laughing and singing through a Swedish night, a happy chuntering idiot, for everything gave meaning, everything was laden with meaning, it was as if a new light had been cast over the world. In Stockholm we went swimming, we lay in parks reading, we ate in restaurants, it didn't matter what we did, it was the fact that we did it that was important. (MS II, 227)

He describes a scene from later in that summer:

> The town sparkled around us as we walked home, Linda in the white jacket I had given her as a present that morning, and walking there, hand in hand with her, in the midst of this beautiful and, for me, still foreign town, sent wave after wave of pleasure through me. We were still full of ardor and desire, for our lives had turned, not just on the breath of a passing wind, but fundamentally. We planned to have children. We had no sense of anything awaiting us except

happiness. (MS II, 241)

When the summer ends, these high feelings subside. "Everything was as it had been, yet it wasn't, for imperceptibly, so imperceptibly that it seemed as if it wasn't happening, something in our lives lost its luster. The fire that drove us toward each other and into the world no longer burned as bright." (MS II, 236). In fact, by the time she reads this account of falling in love, a reader of *My Struggle* knows very well that the novels are being written in the midst of the marriage that emerged form this love, that Karl Ove and Linda's three children (he now has four) sap his energy and make him feel empty. One theme of *My Struggle* is that its author loses this connection to the meaning of things from his youth, and also from experiences like his first love with Linda. The main thing that moves him is his writing. But the writing, he thinks, further drains the meaning out of his day to day family life, if for no other reason than by simply being more important to him than his family.

People can fall in love in all sorts of ways, and surely sometimes it is not as sudden and as gushy as what Knausgaard describes. Knausgaard is a very dramatic sort of person. But I quote from *My Struggle* because the basic phenomenon of what William calls the first flash of love is so vivid in it, and so undeniably familiar. And Knausgaard's account of his first love has much in common with what Judge William says about it.

William says that falling in love is a 'divine gift' or 'gift of the god.' (SLW, 121, 148, 164). "All falling in love is a wonder— marvel not, then, that the understanding

stands still while the lovers kneel in adoration before the wonder's sacred symbol." (SLW, 121). He also writes that "it is the nature of first love to take by surprise" (EO II, 43). To the individual, the birth of erotic love will always feel like a shock. Knausgaard says that encountering Linda was, for him, a "kind of explosion". What is the significance of this? In what sense is it shocking? Is it, perhaps, shocking because it is so hard to understand why we are so taken with this particular person? It is worth noting that Judge William never gives any indication that he thinks that love is hard to understand in this sense, as though there is *no explanation to be had* as to why So and so fell in love. As I understand it, to say that love is immediate is not the same as to say that falling in love is unpredictable. (Perhaps one of the lessons of the *Seducer's Diary* is that falling in love can in fact be engineered, though perhaps not one's own falling in love). I don't think that that's the what Knausgaard is really trying to say either. It's true that he's already married, but Karl Ove and Linda meet at a moment in their lives when both of them are emotionally open. They have a lot in common. They are both artists, around the same age. She is beautiful and intelligent. He is a handsome, interesting, and intense man, already a successful writer. They are each other's type. Actually anyone could have guessed that they might fall for each other. This sort of thing happens all the time at this kind of professional retreat.

Falling in love may or may not be unpredictable, but both Knausgaard and Kierkegaard seem interested in showing us how in an entirely different way it is always unprecedented. Its shock is the shock of a new beginning in a very profound sense: as a new beginning of value and meaning. It is experienced as the origin of meaning, which is, by definition, something that one cannot fully intend in any straightforward sense.

Knausgaard emphasizes over and over how his new love seemed to invest everything else in his life with new significance. In first love, the categories one applies to one's own experiences, the projects that give meaning to one's day to day labors, seem broken open. What William emphasizes in dwelling on "the first" is that new values and passions and preferences seem to erupt out of our experience of the beloved, learned anew from our own encounter with her, rather than being applied to her case from outside. William writes, "The highest expression of falling in love is that the lover feels like nothing before the beloved, and *vice versa*, because to feel oneself to be something conflicts with falling in love. (SLW, 115). This is (part of) how when we fall in love we suddenly seem to exist in our own world apart with the beloved. As Knausgaard recounts, "Geir and Christina said we were impossible to be with, we had eyes only for each other, and it was true, there was no world beyond the one we had built." (MS II, 227). Judge William writes in this vein,

> [T]he first love is an absolute awakening, an absolute intuiting, and this must be held fixed lest a wrong be done to it. It is directed upon a single specific actual object, which alone exists for it; nothing else exists at all. This one object does not exist in vague outlines but as a specific living being. (EO II, 42).

The romantic, as we saw, interprets immediacy through the idea that erotic love is a matter of natural necessity. It is a compulsion. First love, as it is conceived by William, is instead immediate not in its passivity so much as by being an *origin of meaning in one's*

life. First love is immediate in the sense that the love doesn't derive from the application of an external rule or value we already held. The lover doesn't see something in the beloved that is, to him, valuable separate from her existence. Thus the disorientation Karl Ove feels at remembering that he is in fact already married: falling in love makes the rest of our life feel unreal. Thus the love is "first" both in the sense that this is the beginning of *this* love, and in the sense that the individual is as if born again in love.

Karl Ove describes the scene the morning after he and Linda first sleep together:

> When I first woke up I didn't know where I was. But then I saw Linda and remembered everything. I snuggled up to her, she opened her eyes, we made love again, and it was so right, was so good, I knew with the whole of my being it was her and me, and I told her.
> "We must have children together," I said. "Anything else would be a crime against nature." She laughed.
> "It's meant to be," I said. "I'm absolutely sure. I've never felt like this ever."
> She stopped laughing and looked at me.
> "Do you really mean that?" she asked.
> "Yes, I do," I replied. "If you don't feel the same then that's something else. But you do, don't you. I can feel that, too."
> "Is this real? she said. "Are you lying here in my bed? And saying you want children with me?" (MS II, 226).

It would be one thing if Karl Ove had been looking for a good woman to have children with. First love doesn't work like that. Rather, somehow the desire for children (or, as here, the thought that to fail to have children would be a "crime against nature") erupts out of the erotic experience. Later we will see that William thinks that children are not to be confused with a reason to marry (or maintain the marriage). Children are a blessing of the marriage, so long as one does not, in William's phrase, "disorder the relationship" (EO II, 72).

6: First love: Time and Possibility

We saw that the romantic is marked by a conviction that his love is eternal in the straightforward sense that it will last forever. The most unreasonable and naive part of Knausgaard's narrative is likewise his conviction that this loving is something that he will feel for the rest of his life. "I knew I loved her and always would." writes Knausgaard (MS II, 219). "I love you. That is how it is. And somewhere I always will, regardless of what happens to us." he writes in his letter (MS II, 220). Judge William writes of a similar sense of confidence in first love, that first love "fears no danger". First love feels "sufficiently secure" and thinks that it "needs no support" (EO II, 46). First love "in itself is immediately certain" (EO II, 47).

For the romantic, the eternity of love was interpreted under the category of natural necessity. The alternative way that William conceives of the relationship between first love and eternity is, I think, very hard to grasp, and it will take the rest of this chapter to

bring it out. William wants to say that the first has a special way of being in time, or, more precisely, that in first love, there is a special relationship to be found between what we feel in the present and a possibility that the lover sees.

The formulations that William uses to talk about first love and eternity directly contend for the honor of being the most opaque feature of the William texts, which is saying a lot. But I believe that we cannot understand the rest of William's argument if we don't have this figured out. William writes, for example, that first love somehow "possesses the whole content." (EO II, 41). He says that "The whole is *implicite* in the first and is present κατα κρυψιν.*"* (EO II, 39). He says that for people that are happy in love, "the first contains the promise of the future, is the motivating, the infinite impulse. These are the happy individuals for whom the first is nothing but the present, but the present as the continually unfolding and rejuvenating first." (EO II, 39). "For the happy individualities, the first love is also the second, the third, the last […] (EO II, 41). These are very abstruse and paradoxical pronouncements. Naturally when one designates first love as "first", it is integral to the very idea of this predicate "the first" that it separates off a part of a sequence. First love is love that will eventually pass to the next love or the next stage, the second, which will no longer have all the same qualities that the first did. William writes, instead, that the first "contains the whole" and that when one remains in love, one remains in the first love. But what can William have in mind?

Instead of scrutinizing these vatic remarks on their own, we will make a better beginning in understanding William's conception of first love in relation to time if we look closely at some of the examples William compares and contrasts to first love. In one rich passage William considers three examples of things that are themselves in one

way or another the first of their kind, and which have a special 'solemnity' and 'meaning' because they are the first. William compares these to first love. His purpose is, ultimately, to talk about the nature of first love in relation to time and possibility. The following is one uncut paragraph, which I have separated to delineate the three examples.

> [1] With a few examples, I shall illustrate in more detail what I mean. We greet the first greenness, the first swallow with a certain solemnity. The reason for this, however, is the conception we attach to it; consequently, here what is heralded in the first is something other than the first itself, the first particular swallow.
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> [2] There is an engraving that portrays Cain murdering Abel. In the background, one sees Adam and Eve. Whether the engraving itself is valuable I am unable to decide, but the caption has always interested me: *prima caedes, primi parentes, primus luctus* [the first killing, the first parents, the first sorrow]. Here again the first has a profound meaning, and here it is the first itself that we contemplate, but it is still more with respect to time than to content, since we do not see the continuity with which the whole is established by the first. The whole must naturally be understood as sin propagating itself in the race.

> [3] (The first sin, if by this we think of Adam and Eve's fall, would itself steer thought more to the continuity, but since it is the nature of evil not to have continuity, you will readily perceive why I do not use this example.) (EO II, 40-41).

There are a few things to sort out here. We are given three examples, in each of which "the first" has a "profound meaning". But William says of the first two examples—the first signs of spring, and the Biblical story of the first murder—that although they do have a sort of solemnity to them that is due to the fact that they are first, their pathos is not structured like that of first love. Then there is the story of Adam and Eve. William thinks that this is, with qualification, a better analogue for first love. William leaves most of the work of interpreting the examples to his reader, but he does say a little about how the first two examples are not like first love. With the signs of spring the problem is that "what is heralded in the first is something other than the first itself"; and with the first murder "we do not see the continuity with which the whole is established by the first". Thus William indicates what he believes does constitute the special meaningfulness of the first love: that first love (a) heralds, and is somehow also the thing that is heralded; and in first love (b) we "see the continuity with which the whole is established by the first".

Let us go through these in more detail.

1: The first signs of spring

Each year there is some day in the spring when we look around and really notice the first

shoots of green grass and green leaves. We look up at the sky and notice the first swallows swooping overhead and hear them twittering. This makes us (let us suppose) sentimental and happy. This, William posits, is not just because we like the color green or are delighted by birds. It is also, in part, because we attach a "conception" to these things. These are the first signs of spring. It has been a long winter, but spring is here at last. This is (for the purposes of this example) what the swallows signify to us: it is the change in seasons that it symbolizes and announces, that makes us so joyous.

This is, let us say, one possible way that what we feel about something that is present to us, and is 'the first', can, in William's phrase, "contain the promise of the future". Something could contain the promise of the future in the sense that the richness of the pathos we feel at experiencing it could depend, in part, upon how much we care about what it announces or anticipates.

Now the question is: Is this the way in which first love is pregnant with so much meaning? Is the pathos of first love structurally similar to the pathos of the first signs of spring? Since this is the beginning of Karl Ove and Linda's relationship, they are learning about each other, and about the way that they are together. Perhaps in the same way that the sight of a swallow can herald the coming of spring to us, the good chemistry and compatibility and so forth that they are perceiving between themselves, out to dinner one night, is experienced by them as (in part) a vista on a new possibility: as something announcing to each of them the prospect of a happy life together that they hadn't seen before. As they get to know each other, each of them awakens to the possibility: 'Hey, this person might really be someone I could spend my life with.' Perhaps, then, the joy and relief that each of them feels at the signs of such a consequential (and, it may be,

long-hoped-for) prospect in one's life is powerful in proportion to the enormity of the prospect itself. Emerson, in his essay "Love", makes an observation that is something like this: "Looking at these aims with which two persons, a man and a woman, so variously and correlatively gifted, are shut up in one house to spend in the nuptial society forty or fifty years, I do not wonder at the emphasis with which the heart prophesies this crisis"[16]

This is one candidate explanation of the sentimentality of first love and how it relates to time: first love is so intense because something truly important *is indicated through it*. The pathos of the first is the pathos with which we feel secure in the anticipation of something wonderful: at the nuptial society of forty or fifty years.

According to William, however, this does not capture the solemnity of first love. Or, to be more precise, William brings up the example of the signs of spring to show us how it is analogous *and not analogous* to first love. William's objection to the example of the signs of spring is that, as he puts it, "here what is heralded in the first is something other than the first itself, the first particular swallow." The sentimentality of the swallow depends upon the fact that the swallow symbolizes and announces *something else.* The

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[16] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987) 187-88. Later Emerson indicates that he thinks that the sensual side of young love, and its beginning in beauty, is there as a sort of place holder. The real substance of marriage eventually grows into and displaces the erotic love. "At last they discover that all which at first drew them together,—those once sacred features, that magical play of charms, — was deciduous, had a prospective end, like the scaffolding with which the house was built; and the purification of the intellect and the heart from year to year is the real marriage, foreseen and prepared from the first, and wholly above their consciousness." (ibid). Rousseau writes similarly: "Whatever precautions anyone may take, enjoyment wears out pleasures, and love is worn out before all others. But when love has lasted a long time, a sweet habit fills the void it leaves behind, and the attraction of mutual confidence succeeds the transports of passion." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Allan Bloom (United States: Basic Books, 1979), 479. William wants to claim that this is not correct. The first love doesn't prepare the way for *something else* that will take its place.

swallow refers out, as it were, for its significance to us. But the sentimentality of first love, William asserts, doesn't refer out like that.

It is important to note here that William does not deny that first love heralds, announces, anticipates *per se*. In fact what he says seems to imply that it does. What he objects to, apparently, is not the idea of heralding, but that "what is heralded is something other than the first itself." In other words, to William, if the pathos of first love has to do with what is anticipated, *what is anticipated is also somehow the same as what is perceived in the present here and now*. In other words, if there is, as he says, "a promise of the future" contained in the experience and being of first love, it is the promise of a life of loving that is, in character, the growth and full flowering of this same passion that we are now experiencing. Karl Ove and Linda in the cafe today see and feel the love itself whose prospect in a long life—the nuptial society of forty or fifty years, to use Emerson's phrase—they are, in turn, erotically excited by. Unlike the signs of spring, which point past themselves, the experience of early love is felt in light of the possibility *of this loving*, and shines out through it.

This brings us back to erotic love's immediacy. First love doesn't just symbolize something that we already appreciate the goodness of. Instead, the first love Karl Ove and Linda feel at the restaurant—the ease with which they spend time together, the laughter, the beauty, *itself invests the future that they now feel is possible with meaning.* It would be one thing if Karl Ove was hoping for such and such a future, and then Linda stepped in and fit the role and made it look possible. First love doesn't work like that. Rather, his love for her itself invests that future with value.

So here is one element of William's account of the nature of first love: first love is

linked to anticipation, but not anticipation of something other than this love itself. An afternoon spent in the joys of early love foretells a life of love, and is also an instantiation of the love that is foretold. This goes a little way to understanding why first love is first, that "For the happy individualities, the first love is also the second, the third, the last…" (EO II, 41).

2: The first murder

The next analogy is the story of Cain and Abel. The solemnity spoken of here is the solemnity one feels at seeing an engraving that depicts the first murder. Usually in this subject Cain is shown straddling Abel, rearing up to brain him with a stick or stone. Abel interposes a pathetic hand and wrist. In the background the parents look on in shock.

In this case, William claims, "it is the first itself that we contemplate". In other words, unlike the swallow, the significance to us of the story of Cain and Abel is not that it announces anything else. The first murder has a special solemnity and meaning, rather, because we take it to stand for the human phenomenon that it itself was the first instance of. Its significance to us as a story has to do with the fact that again and again those who feel unloved lash out and commit acts of violence, like Cain.

Thus for the second time we are presented with a way in which first love could 'contain the whole': the first could have a special solemnity for us because it represents for us all the things that it is the first instance of. And again the question is: is this the right way of understand the way we experience the passion of first love? One might think so, especially in light of what we've just seen about the analogy of the signs of spring.

Perhaps the right way to understand what is going on with Karl Ove and Linda in the restaurant is this: they are experiencing the joy of being in each other's presence in love, and the intensity of what they feel has to do with the accompanying perception that there may be a lifetime of enchanting evenings like this one. They may look back on this first love as the early time, the first instantiation, of their totally new emotional existence.

According to William, however, the example of Cain and Abel also fails to capture the nature of first love in relation to possibility. Again William has brought up the example in order to show the way in which it is both analogous and not analogous to first love. What William says about the Cain and Abel story is that "Here again the first has a profound meaning, and here it is the first itself that we contemplate, but it is still more with respect to time than to content, since we do not see the continuity with which the whole is established by the first." (EO II, 41). The way in which the significance to us of the first murder has to do with representation and recurrence, does not capture the correct relationship to time and possibility that first love has. Apparently, if we appreciate what is really going on inside of Karl Ove and Linda in the restaurant, what they are feeling is not something that they anticipate will dwell in or revisit them again and again. First love is not a representative *instance* of the thing. Somehow, there is also the "continuity" through time, which is something more than that. Somehow, the whole is not just represented by the first but "established by the first".

What does William mean by this continuity? Why does the story of Cain and Abel lack it? We could consider it this way: When Cain murdered Abel, he did something that other men would also do. But Cain's act considered in its content—what drove him, what he took himself to be doing, what made it terrible—itself had no relationship to past or

future crimes of the same sort. Cain was not thinking of those crimes. Cain did not commit his crime to pave the way so that other crimes could also be committed. He killed is brother because he was jealous. He was the first to do so. Cain committed murder, and it was horrible. The next person who murdered someone also did something horrible. *But the two crimes don't depend on each other for their existence, or their horribleness.* I take it that William is saying that erotic love is essentially different from the Cain and Abel example in that respect. With erotic love, the idea of the transformation of one's whole life by love penetrates and feeds into the experience we have in the moment in a much more total and immediate way than that. And *vice versa:* the attractiveness of the possibility depends upon our present experience of erotic love in a much more essential way. *One's experience of first love does not exist independently of the idea of the possibility of that love itself transforming one's emotional life*.[17]

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[17]At the risk of proliferating the illustrations to excess, allow me to sketch one more analogy, which I take to have the same sort of disanalogy as the Cain and Abel example—the same sort of difference from first love. Imagine the happiness one might feel at tasting, for the first time, a peach from a tree that grows in one's own yard, anticipating that this will be tasted again and again. There is the delicious taste, and then, let us say, there is the anticipation of more, the satisfaction that one's life may be full of delicious ripe peaches from this tree that taste like this. In other words the experience of tasting of the first peach is also augmented and affected by the thought of all the peaches to come.

The way I understand William's point about "content" and "continuity" is this: this is not how first love anticipates a future life of love. Instead, first love is bound up with the thought of the future much more intimately. In the peach example, there is the pleasure of eating the first peach. Then there is the satisfaction we feel at knowing that this is our own peach tree and we can have peaches from it as long as we please. Both of these things is pleasurable. The problem—the thing that makes it different from erotic love—is that these two sources of pleasure are of course quite separable. The peach would still be delicious even if it wasn't from one's own tree and showed us no prospect. The prospect of peaches-to-come can be relished even if one has never sampled one. In erotic love they are inseparable. The pathos of the present and the pathos of the possibility are interanimated.

The tradition in theology that Kierkegaard would have been familiar with marks a conceptual difference between something that is 'eternal' and something that travels through time forever. Something eternal exists at all times simultaneously. Aquinas, following Augustine and Boethius[18], calls eternity "simultaneously whole".[19] These theologians care about this because they think that God's mind is eternal in this way. How much philosophical purchase that distinction has when it is said of God and God's mind is well beyond my purposes here (as it is beyond the purview of *Either/Or*). But in relation to erotic love this distinction may mark a difference that it is quite important to see and appreciate. For the romantic, as we saw, love is supposed to be everlasting in the sense that this love will endure through time and travail, and his object is in some sense to prove that this is true in fact. For William, it is important to see that erotic love is eternal, not just everlasting. It is eternal in the sense that although Karl Ove is at this moment in the restaurant, in love with Linda, through this loving he is also able to, emotionally, live in light of the whole life of love, which that love invests and informs with pathos. Erotic love penetrates time forward and back and exists in a way that, in William's phrase, contains time rather than just existing at some time.

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[18] Boethius is the first to give the canonical description of the difference in *Consolation of Philosophy*. He writes, "That then which comprehendeth and possesseth the whole fullness of an endless life together, to which neither any part is absent, nor that which is past hath escaped, is worthy to be accounted eternal." Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, in *Readings in Western Religious Thought II: The Middle Ages Through the Reformation*, trans. H.F. Stuart (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 45).

[19] Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica,* in *The Basic Writings of Thomas Aquinas Volume I,* trans. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1944). I, 10, iv.

3: The first sin

The last of the three examples is the story of Adam and Eve, the first sin. William writes, as a sort of caveat to the analogy, that "since it is the nature of evil not to have continuity, you will readily perceive why I do not use this example." (EO II, 41). But he does nevertheless bring it up for its illustrative value, and it is worth looking at.

Adam and Eve defy God's command and eat the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge, committing the original sin, the sin that sets all members of the human race on a path to struggle as sinners in their earthly lives in perpetuity. This, thinks William, is the best of the three examples when it comes to paralleling the phenomenon of first love in relation to continuity. With the story of Adam and Eve to a Christian, its significance is not merely that it announces something to us; nor is its significance to us merely that it is the first time something happened in history that will happen again and again. Rather, the significance is that by and through this first sin, as William puts it, "sin propagat[es] itself in the race". To a Christian, the first sin itself engendered a fate, a form, for the human race,

Consider the difference between this story and the story of Cain and Abel. Cain, we said, committed the first murder, and that murder can forever represent the rest of murder in human life. But that murder Cain committed was itself a horror, independently of whether or not any other murder ever occurred. The Fall, to a Christian (at least one like William), is different. There is a deeper connection and continuity between the first sin and all subsequent sin. In the Fall, *what the crime (according to William) was, what they were up to when they ate the fruit,* was to fundamentally change the race into the sort

of being that continually commits the crime of turning away from God. When one sins, as a Christian, one participates in the first sin. First love, William is saying, is more like the Fall. *First love is what it is* only by the activity of establishing its own being through time. William thinks that when one is in a relationship constituted by erotic love, one is always participating in the first love.[20]

The picture we get when we put these thoughts together is this: The meaningfulness in first love is to be found in an interanimation of the passion as it is felt today and the possibility that that passion raises for one's life. In erotic love, what is happening in the present does not just announce a good future to us: what is present in us projects the future to us, in the sense in which a small slide projects a larger image on a wall. One only sees the image on the slide by way of its projection, and *vice versa.* One only experiences the love now through the prospect-of-love that it raises and compels us to pursue, and conversely the prospect-of-love is only attractive to us because of the enchantment of the love we are experiencing in this particular place, looking on this person's particular beauty.

William, as we have seen, says of A that A wants to experience first love over and

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[20] The question remains: what are we to make of William's caveat? When William makes his palinode here and says that "it is the nature of evil not to have continuity", I take him to be pointing out that Adam and Eve have a special role as founders that subsequent sinners do not have. He is pointing out is that for an individual now, e.g for A, it is not the case that when A sins he causes his contemporaries or other children of God to become more evil. Each individual, within the universal Christian story, has his own choices and is own cross to bear.

This, in turn, indicates that this deeper person to person, or moment to moment, continuity is something that William *does* think first love has.

over again. William writes to A,

> I beg you to recall the little contradiction we encountered— the first love possesses the whole content; to that extent it seems most sagacious to snatch it and then go on to another first love. But when one empties the first love of its content in this way, it vanishes, and one does not obtain the second love either. (EO II, 46).

Someone like A wants to experience first love over and over, going from one woman to the next, because he correctly perceives that the beginning is the most sweet and pathos-filled time of a love affair (at least, that is, in an esthetic life). But William claims that this can never in fact be love. According to William such a scheme is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of erotic love. Erotic love by nature can *only* be experienced when there is a closed circuit that runs between the present and the real expectation of a possibility presented in it. So in order to feel love in the present, *we have got to live in light of that love's eternity.* A does not believe that that eternity is possible, so he cannot experience authentic first love.

What William calls the reflective age tries to treat love as, in William's terms, a "simply sensual" matter: as something that exists entirely in our experience of a moment (EO II, 42). Nothing about this moment depends upon the next moment. If I sink my teeth into a ripe peach, then this is pleasurable, in principle, independently of what happens tomorrow or even the next second. A tries to treat love like eating a peach. But in fact to take the attitude that A takes toward love—an attitude that appreciates that there

will be no future to this love—will always be to empty first love of its true pathos. In erotic love, the true sensual beauty is only accessible to us if we actually believe in the love-possibility presented to us in it.

In this chapter we have explored the way in which William begins his account of marriage and marital love by rehabilitating the idea of love's eternity. The romantic thinks that if his love is real, then it will last forever. But he thinks this under the category of "natural necessity"—his erotic love is something he suffers. To someone of A's disposition, this eternity is a scandal—this is simply not the way life turns out. Instead, to A, erotic love bursts into bloom, and from then on there is only (and always) degradation in store for it.

With his remarks on first love, William begins to offer an account that is different from both of these, or, as he conceives of it, a "higher union" of them. First love, indeed, comes upon us involuntarily. And it is, as A says, weak, and liable to vanish as mysteriously as it came. Yet William thinks that all erotic love—even first love—bears the stamp of eternity. In first love, a person is wrapped up in tenderness toward the beloved who is present to him, but in a way that is intrinsically invested with the perceived possibility that that person raises for his whole existence. The value of this whole life is informed by the new experience of the beloved, and the beloved's beauty is enlivened in our eyes by the whole life we see with her.

The three characteristics of romantic love return reimagined in William's conception of first love. First love is immediate, not because we have no control over it, but because it is the origin of meaning. First love is eternal, not in the sense that we will

go on loving So and so forever no matter what, but in the sense that a vision of the fulfillment of that love over a lifetime is essential to its existence and to our experience of it. First love is situated in striving, but not striving against obstacles outside itself. First love, rather, exists in and with our own involvement in the love's development.

Chapter Two: Judge William and Doubt

> If to love is the highest good and the greatest blessedness, and if the one who loves, just by believing all things, remains in the blessedness of love— how then could he be deceived in time or in eternity? No, no, in connection with true love, there is only one deception possible in time and in eternity— self-deception, or giving up love.
>
> -Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*[1]

1: The transformation of first love

In the months before I was married, our officiant asked my wife and I to each consider and write down for him a paragraph or two about why we wanted to get married. He pointed out that weddings were things that tended to move along with a great head of steam. He wanted us each separately to take time out, to step away, and to ask ourselves honestly why—and whether—this thing was what we wanted. He seemed to think that the danger wasn't just that one of us might not have thought through what marriage entails, like how a child might not think through all the responsibilities that come with owning a dog. Much more than this, he mentioned having had experience with people discovering that there was no real basis for the union at all; finding out, as if throwing off some sort of derangement, that this was never what they desired.

Interestingly he also said that this self-reflection would help the ceremony "mean more to us". I did not ask him what he meant by those words, or why he thought it was the case. One thing that he might have meant—and what I took him to mean at the time—

[1] WL, 244.

was that in some sense the ceremony itself had potency and significance to a couple when it truly represented and enacted a kind of considered choice. This is how the decision could be truly authored by one, actually one's own: that one, in the ceremony, carries what one has gathered up in real introspection, consideration, consciousness, to the vow. And perhaps that, to him, was what would make the marriage he was going to perform have validity. The fact of the marriage—becoming husband and wife, ought, in some sense, *to mean that this reflection had happened.* On this model, what it would amount to be married would be to have come through that process, to have asked oneself some sobering questions and to have answered them, "yes, on reflection, a life with her is a good idea". These questions could in principle have been answered in the negative: "No, when I really think it through, this marriage will make me miserable." Or even: "I am smitten with her but I can see, on reflection, that she is a small and selfish person."

At the end of the last chapter, we came to a point in the argument where the lovers are in first love. We saw that first love exists in the dynamics of a projected possibility: the life opened up by loving this person. The first love has the "qualification of the eternal" in the sense that the perceived possibility of the love's development is essential to the lover's experience of it. But the reality is that on its own first love as such is not durable. Judge William in fact agrees with his friend the esthete that the day to day realities of life lived closely with another person will erode the spontaneous first love. Or, to be more exact, the love will disintegrate if—and here is where he parts ways with A—the lover fails to transfigure it into a higher form.

In the next three chapters, my subject will be: what, then, is this transfiguration? What is the higher form? If William thinks that erotic love can transform from A to B,

what is the difference between A and B? And what does the individual do to make this transformation in his erotic love? One candidate for what it could amount to transform erotic love by marrying is what my minister seemed to think: a marriage is a marriage when the lovers have taken something sensual and emotional but not-yet-considered and validated it with a more critical, rational reflection on what they want out of life. Marriage is a decision. A decision gets its validity from the idea that we have deliberated well in making it. What we need to understand in this chapter is that William thinks that this is not the way first love can grow, and this is not what it amounts to be married. In fact William says, instead, that this critical mode of reflection, which he calls doubt, "annihilates first love". William does believe that the first love must be transformed through reflection. (EO II, 41; SLW 102, 157). The difficult thing to understand is that this reflection is not the reflection of objective self-scrutiny. It is not the kind of standing back that my minister (as I understood him) seemed to think we needed. William posits, rather, another kind of reflection: the reflection of resolution and what he calls choosing oneself. It is the latter that is the basis of marital love.

This alternative kind of reflection is also, I believe, something that Judge William himself personifies, and what, in a way, his writings exemplify. The ultimate purpose of this chapter is to understand what William says about reflection in the mode of doubt. Kierkegaard partly addresses doubt directly in William's argument. But in large part William's rejection of doubt is represented in the personality of the pseudonym itself. And we come to understand the things that William says about doubt at the same time that we come to understand who William is and why he writes. In Sections Two and Three of this chapter, I will look closely at the latter. In Section Four I will connect this to

what he says about doubt directly, in relation to reflection and love, as a way of approaching Chapter Three's analysis of reflection and resolution.

2: Who is Judge William?

In Chapter One, we dove straight into the argument. Now it will be worthwhile to take a moment out to wonder a little about who is making it. Who is Judge William?

Perhaps one place to begin in answering this question is to ask: what are we reading when we read a text by Judge William? Ostensibly, what we are reading is either the two letters the Judge writes to his friend, or a manuscript that is his defense of marriage, as he puts it, "in reply to objections". But in a more general way, what is the form or genre of what we're reading?

Is it, for example, philosophy? If one is seen reading *Either/Or Part II* or *Stages on Life's Way* on the subway and is asked what it is, presumably the most accurate and helpful thing to say is that it is a work of philosophy. Judge William appears to engage in philosophy in the straightforward sense that he gives a systematic account of how to live a good life. His letters and his manuscript are written in philosophical language (indeed, he helps himself 19th century Hegelian jargon that no one but philosophers even claim to understand), on a topic that calls for close conceptual analysis like a philosopher would give. William also appears to write philosophy in the deeper sense that the provenance of philosophy has always been not so much things that are miraculous or mysterious on the face of it, but rather things that, before the philosopher came along, had seemed well

understood. The reader, perhaps, thinks that she knows what it means to be married and to say "I do". An encounter with William's insights may break up that understanding, And this doubt about marriage and family life, perhaps, leads the reader into an even broader uneasiness: the reader thought that she knew what a choice is, and now she wonders whether she has ever made one.

And yet Judge William denies that he is a philosopher. He says so no less than seven times in his two letters, and once more in *Remarks on Marriage*. He is not a philosopher, and he does not aim "to compete for any philosophical status" (EO II, 173). What does William mean by this? Sometimes when he claims he is not a philosopher William implies that this is because he lacks the ability or training to think like a philosopher. William has a different day job (is this, perhaps, one reason Kierkegaard has to make him a judge: that then we will not mistake him for an intellectual?). He admits he is not a "philosophical brain" (EO II, 171). He says, "Far be it from me to credit myself with any real philosophic competence." (EO II, 211). "Philosopher" has always been a precious term, and William, perhaps, disavows the title just to avoid being mugged for trespassing. William is certainly not writing an academic argument: he is not engaged in a defense of a position on the nature of marriage in relation to other public positions theorists of marriage hold, as the professional philosophers of his time would have done.

In other passages, however, William makes it clear that when he says he is not a philosopher he means something a bit more interesting than this. He says that he is not a philosopher because he writes, instead, as a married man.

> As you know, I have never passed myself off as a philosopher, least

> of all when I am conversing with you. Partly to tease you a little, partly because it actually is my most cherished, precious, and in a certain sense most meaningful occupation in life, I usually appear as a married man. (EO II, 170).

William here and elsewhere implies that one can either "appear" as a philosopher or a married man, but not both. In these letters, philosophical though they seem, *William tells us that he is in fact writing as a married man.* And this leaves us with a new puzzle. We might rather have expected William to say the opposite: that he is a married man who, in these pages, appears as a philosopher. When William is enjoying his wife's company he is a married man of course. But if we are speaking of 'appearing' as one thing or another in life, when he is at his desk writing analytically about erotic love and marriage, is it not more natural that he should then come, instead, in the guise, however humbly or unprofessionally, of a philosopher? Why, and how, at such a time, does he instead address us as a married man?

This identity as a married man is always stated somewhat in passing in *Either/Or.* It is made more urgent in *Stages on Life's Way*. In the latter, the full title of William's manuscript is *Remarks on Marriage in Reply to Objections, by a Married Man.* In his opening, William says a little about what this means:

> I am far from being learned and make no claims to that; it would be embarrassing if I were foolish enough to assume anything like that. I am not a dialectician, not a philosopher, but to the best of my ability

> respect learning and everything that brilliant people offer to explain life. I am, however, a married man, and when it comes to marriage I am afraid of no one. If I were asked, I would confidently and cheerfully stand at the professor's lectern, even if what I have to say is not entirely appropriate for delivery from a lectern. I boldly argue my thesis with all the world's dialecticians, with Satan himself— he shall not be able to wrench my conviction away from me. Let the nitpicking chicaners pile up all their objections to marriage— their case will collapse. (SLW, 92).

William comments here that what he has to say is not entirely appropriate for delivery from a lectern. I take it that William is telling us (or, to be more exact, showing us) why in the next sentence: because he argues with an insuperable conviction and confidence. When a person stands at a lectern (rather than, say, a pulpit) there is a tacit contract between himself and his listener that the speaker has come to, and holds, his views critically. He has considered the things that he is saying, and tried to accurately assess the objective truth. He is willing to hear out others who don't agree with him. William here declares just the opposite. William instead proclaims for himself only a sort of implacability. He is dismissive of those that disagree with him: "Their objections can quickly be classified in two parts: those which one best answers, as Hamann says, by saying "Bah" — the others can quickly be disposed of." (SLW, 92). William presents himself as a partisan, a soldier. It is his calling as a married man to "battle on behalf of marriage" (EO II, 11), and to do so fearlessly. He fights, he insists, "under the victorious

banner of the happy first love". (SLW 93). "Humble before God, submissive to the divine majesty of love, I proudly hold my head high above all witticisms and do not bow my head to any objection. (SLW, 106).

In *The Esthetic Validity of Marriage* William reserves his most unrestrained ire for married men who "betray the institution" by putting it down (EO II, 32). Here in *Remarks on Marriage* William is in his fullest froth over married men who disbelieve what he calls the "miracle" of marriage:

> But a slug of a married man like that ought to be put in a sack like a patricide and thrown into the water. What agony to see a woman exhaust all her lovableness in persuading him, to see him, after having received the initiation that entitles him to be a believer, only spoil everything—spoil everything— because, jesting aside, marriage in many ways is really a venture in natural magic and a venture in it is truly wonderful. (SLW, 90).

In this paroxysm of seemingly unwitting disclosure of his own biases, William compares the correct attitude toward the miracle of marriage—the miracle by which little things come to seem significant and charming—to the right way to attend a magic show: with credulity and not as "a killjoy … who continually disbelieves." (SLW, 90).

Other commentators have written on Kierkegaard's relationship to the dominant post-Hegelian academic philosophy of mid-19th century Copenhagen. I wonder, though,

whether when he claims he is not a philosopher but a married man, William might be indicating his distance from something older and more fundamental in the tradition. If a person standing at a lectern presents himself as critical, the person of a philosopher has an even more profound relationship to open-mindedness and doubt. Socrates led the citizens of Athens to doubt that they understood the words that they lived by. When Socrates had done his work, he had created in his interlocutors an uneasy feeling that the things that they took for granted in their identity—the things that they thought their lives were about and that they put themselves forward as emulating or embodying—were strange to them. Jonathan Lear writes that "Plato emphasizes the importance of the disruptive, disorienting experience as that from which philosophical activity emerges."[2] (Lear 2011, 20). Socrates was an undoer of knowledge. This undoing is what Socrates (at least for most of the Platonic corpus, the part generally thought to be the earliest and most influenced by Socrates himself) takes his life to mean and personify. He presents himself as someone who himself did not claim to know—as someone who did not have wisdom, but was seeking it. He is only wise, he says, in the sense that he appreciates how little wisdom he possesses.[3]

Although his work and methodology is very different, the father of Enlightenment philosophy too personifies a kind of doubt. The work of Descartes is in some ways the opposite of Socrates: Descartes wants to build a scientific system of knowledge; and, in his work, he thinks that he accomplishes this. But it is no coincidence that this

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[2] Lear, *Wisdom,* 20.

[3] Plato, *Apology,* trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001) 20d.

philosopher too is most well known for an act of destruction. Descartes sets off modern philosophy by first famously doubting all of his own presuppositions. He takes what was seemingly most clear to him and "demolishes" it. "I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last."[4] Descartes's Meditations are so effective because the disorientation is so compelling. Am I actually awake? Am I sitting here in my chair, writing these things? Philosophy, in its founding thinkers, has an essential relationship to a vivid experience of real, disruptive doubt. It is not doubt that we entertain, to be read by us with the detachment with which we might read about far off things. Philosophy is alive when we, too, doubt, in a way that is personal to us and directly relevant to our own sense of orientation in life. Plato's Socrates and Descartes show the power of philosophy when they engender that experience. Part of what makes Socrates and Descartes such epochal philosophers—the two most tried and true gates of entry for new students of the discipline— is not just their arguments, but the sharpness of the images with which they embody doubt and open-mindedness. Socrates is the gadfly. Or Socrates is like a torpedo fish who's own perplexity puts others in perplexity. Descartes asks us to imagine him "…here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing gown, holding a piece of paper in my hands" (MFP 13). Judge William's embodiment is very different. The only truly detailed scene of life we are given of William is the tea scene recounted by the editor of *Stages on Life's Way* at the end of *In Vino Veritas*. There, the judge's wife invites him to doubt his life. Specifically, she interrupts their tea time to claim: "It is certain and true

[4] René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy,* trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 12.

that if you had not married you would have become much greater in the world." (SLW 84). (What observation is more guaranteed to stir doubt in a married person than this?) But by all appearances William responds by refusing to cast a critical eye on his decision to marry her. As she goes on describing all the ways he could have been greater in the world, he drums his fingers on the table, hums a ballad, blows away smoke from his cigar. She gives up trying to get him to take her seriously, and they finally disappear arm in arm down a wooded path, apparently very happy in love. (I will take a close look at this fascinating vignette in Chapter Five).

I believe that one way of understanding why William is not a philosopher is to see that William is the personification of something else. He is a reflective man, but his reflection is not reflection in the mode of doubt. And I think that if one wants to get used to reading William and to hearing his voice, then one must get used to reading something that is both philosophy and not philosophy as we understand it, at the same time. William, in fact, doesn't allow doubt in the sense of disorientation into his personal life. I don't just mean that in relation to his reader William is a bit preachy—that he starts by writing a letter and then later admits that against his will it is becoming a 'little essay' (EO II 8). Rather, much more than this, William presents himself as someone who banishes doubt from his experience of erotic love and marriage. He presents himself as opposed to doubt in the sphere of life that is his subject. William puts himself forward, instead, as an advocate for marriage with an unshakeable faith in the married state. Ultimately, this has to do with what he thinks a married man is, and what he thinks the transition from first love to marital love is.

Kierkegaard designated the author of these texts "Judge William". The thing that

strikes the ear most, perhaps, is the title of 'judge', as I will address in the next section. The other part of the pseudonym is William (in Danish, "Vilhelm"). The name William is derived from a combination of the words "will"—willing, wishing, desiring—and "helm", as in protection for the head.

3: Interpretations of Judge William's personality

We want to understand Judge William's arguments about marriage. Kierkegaard has embedded this in the expressions of a personality. The touchstone of William's salient personality is his conviction. William, in his writings, is not a philosopher, because William, in his writings, experiences and comes to know the things that he writes about through commitment and choice, rather than through detachment. His writings themselves are the expression of that devotion, rather than the result of an inquiry inspired by, or proceeding through, some sort of critical knowledge. Ultimately, William seems to think that it is only through an experience of such devotion that his reader will come to see the truth in what he has to say.

But this is not what other commentators have seen in him. And it will be hard to assent to this reading, I think, if one is distracted by some other assumptions about who William is supposed to be. One might think, for example, that William is (or takes himself to be) meant to be addressing us out of a position of experience. He is so implacable because he is old and wise and possesses (so he thinks) deep knowledge of life. Or one might think that William is some sort of conservative. This section takes a

moment to addresses those impressions (if the reader is not under those impressions, and eager to move on to the main thread of the argument in relation to doubt, then they are welcome to skip to the next section).

Kierkegaard's pseudonym Judge William is very longwinded, and most of what he writes is opinion. William constantly adduces his own happiness as proof of his statements on the topic of marital love. Yet, in spite of this, a reader who has worked his way through the four texts must feel that he doesn't really know much materially about the man or his marriage.[5] When William writes about A he can be very specific. He paints the anecdotes in full color. But in relation to himself and his marriage he manages to keep everything hazy and general. Nevertheless commentators have thought that it was

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[5] Victor Eremita, the pseudonymous editor of *Either/Or,* writes,

> But it is necessary to find a more concise expression to characterize the two authors. With that in mind, I have gone through the papers very carefully but have found nothing or practically nothing. As far as the first author, the esthete, is concerned, there is no information at all about him. As far as the other, the letter writer, is concerned, we learn that his name is William and that he has been a judge, but the court is not stipulated. (EO II, 7)

In his biography of Kierkegaard Walter Lowrie says that Judge William is based on a real acquaintance of Kierkegaard, a Copenhagen judge assessor named P.V. Jacobsen. Jacobsen was the oldest member of a sort of informal club, a group of gentlemen who sat together at the same boardinghouse table, that called themselves "The Holy Alliance". According to Lowrie, Johannes the Seducer is based on another man in the same set, P.S. Moller, while 'A' the anonymous esthete is Kierkegaard himself. Walter Lowrie, *A Short Life of Kierkegaard* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1942) 7, 111. I am not in a position to evaluate these claims, but I will point out that if this is true it was apparently not appreciated by *Either/Or's* readers in Copenhagen.

For a very critical take on P.V. Jacobsen (though not one entirely inconsistent with the idea that he could have been the model for William) see Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography,* trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton, NJ: Princecton University Press, 2005) 69.

easy enough to get at what his character is, and often discussion of William's argument proceeds partly *ad hominem*.

As Victor Eremita points out, the one thing that we do know definitely about William is that William is or has been a judge.[6] This is the first thing that any reader hears about him, and the title is repeated all the time. He is referred to as "the Judge" or "Judge William" by Kierkegaard's other pseudonyms. He writes his letters on legal paper, and himself comments to A that "this can perhaps have its good side if it can contribute to giving my words a certain official quality in your eyes." (EO II, 5). What does it mean that Judge William is a judge? None of Kierkegaard's other pseudonyms are identified by a profession in this way. So one assumes it means something important. One thing, of course, that makes someone a *good* judge, is experience. That William is a judge, and calls A "my young friend" [7], might make the reader picture William as a man of experience. Or one assumes that, in contrast to A, William has the mature mind. It is easy to picture William as an older man, as some commentators have.[8]

This picture of William, however, is not quite bourn out by the text. First, it is not literally the case that William is old. William is, in fact, not much older than A. William

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[6] We are never told what sort of judge he is. The closest we come is when William refers to "sitting on a commission of inquiry" (SLW, 137, 182, 183). On one occasion he makes fun of himself for being a bureaucrat (EO II ,83).

[7] William addresses both of his letters to "My friend", but otherwise refers to A as "my friend" only once. His preferred phrasing is "my young friend", using this latter formulation thirteen times. Perhaps this is because, as we learn at the end his second letter, according to William's own understanding of friendship William and A cannot truly be friends. William writes that "The absolute condition for friendship is unity in a life-view." (EO II, 319). Furthermore, friendship requires a "positive life-view", which is only possible if the life views in question have an "ethical element." (EO II, 321).

[8] Walter Lowrie, for example, says that William is "an older man" (Lowrie, *A Short Life,* 150).

himself points out that the difference in their ages—he is seven years A's senior—is not enough to give him "maturity of understanding" (EO II, 87). As for wisdom or experience in the specific subject of marriage, in *Remarks on Marriage* (which we know was at least discovered after the letters of *Either/Or* were published) [9], William says he has been married for eight years (SLW, 125). Eight years isn't nothing (incidentally, the author of this thesis has been married for eight years at time of this writing), but surely it isn't enough to make him an authority on the topic by virtue of long, enduring experience and success. This seems to be something that William himself concedes, opening his argument in *Remarks*, for example, "If a beginner may allow himself an observation […]". (SLW, 90). It is, I think, a very important fact about William that he is at the outset or in the middle of married life, not looking back on it. William writes from

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[9] We are not told how long *Remarks on Marriage* had been finished by William before it was stolen by Victor Eremita, as described in *Stages on Life's Way.* However, the circumstances do lend themselves to the thought that it is a newly completed manuscript at the time of the theft. Victor is said to "see something that drew his attention" through an open window. Papers lying out, one would think. William writes at the very end of *Remarks* that he can hear his wife outside his study, waiting for him to finish the manuscript. He resolves to throw away his "wretched pen" (SLW, 183). Thus the mind naturally turns to the idea that the manuscript of *Remarks on Marriage* has been completed on the very day that the couple is spied on in the garden, that William and his wife are having tea while the freshly completed papers perhaps sit drying, where Victor spies them.

I mention this because if *Remarks is* a newly completed manuscript, then a striking fact emerges about William and his writings. We are told that *Either/Or* is a collection of papers that sat in an antique desk for seven years in the possession of Victor Eremita before Victor accidentally discovered the compartment containing them. Given that the tea scene takes place after the publication *Either/Or* (within the world of the pseudonyms), if *Remarks* was newly written when it was stolen we could then conclude that William must have written the letters of *Either/Or* at least seven years before he wrote *Remarks.* In *Remarks* William says in passing that he has been married for eight years (SLW, 125), which would mean that *William had been married for at most just one year* at the time he completed *The Esthetic Validity of Marriage* and *Balance Between the Esthetic and the Ethical*.

within what he will call the struggle of married life.

Nevertheless, surely it could be the case that the difference between William and "A" is a matter of knowledge, even if they are close in age? Perhaps William, as the advocate of the ethical over the esthetic, possesses some sort of practical wisdom? He is the hero of commitment—so perhaps he is more focused and attentive? My impression is that these things are also not at all clear in the text. Although William is said to be a man with responsibilities[10], from what we actually see William appears to nevertheless be quite a dreamy sort of person. Especially in relation to his wife. In one of the few actual anecdotes in the writings, William depicts himself as looking up from a fit of melancholy. He watches his wife "moving lightly and youthfully about the room" "What it is that she is taking care of— well, I could not tell you if I tried, not if my life depended on it; it remains a riddle to me." (EO II, 307). He wonders "With what does she fill her time?" (EO II, 308). William makes these statements at a point where he is digressing on something highly abstruse about how women "explain time". But whatever he takes his purpose to be, he also betrays a striking uncomprehendingness about his wife's cares, his household, and the everyday needs of domestic life in general. This is to some degree the norm for the time, but Kierkegaard seems to want to underline it sharply in the glimpses he gives of William's disposition.

It is in keeping with this obliviousness that William jokes that "despite being married for eight years I still do not definitely know in a critical sense what my wife looks like." (SLW, 125). He says elsewhere that her physical flaw is her too-small nose,

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[10] For example we are told that William is a man who, unlike A (or Kierkegaard for that matter), has to work to make money to support his family. (EO II, 282).

and that this "has provided the occasion for so much teasing that even if it were within my competence I would never wish her one more beautiful." (EO II, 9). (Is this meant to sound as insufferable as it does?). The last we see of William, at the very end of *Remarks on Marriage*, he writes that he can hear his wife outside his study. He knows she is waiting for him to finish up. He writes—"Just one minute, my beloved, just one moment—my soul is so rich, I am so eloquent at this moment that I want to write it down on paper, a eulogy on you, my lovely better half, and thus convince the whole world of the validity of marriage." (SLW, 183)—thus keeping her out of the room.

I believe that such scenes and others are in fact meant to belie the assumption that the author of *Either/Or Part II,* and *Remarks on Marriage,* whoever he is, is a particularly knowledgeable or observant man, at least in relation to his own marriage. Whatever quality it is that makes him able to tell us about the ethical, it is not these things. If he is mature, it is not in this way. Whatever makes him a judge, it is not his capacity for critical observation. It is worth noting that William's writings on marriage have little of what we would find, in, say, a contemporary manual on how to make a marriage work. There are virtually no strategies, no technical know-how. There is almost no advice to speak of, other than to marry, and to marry only for love. Johannes Climacus observes that "[A]s a thinker, A is advanced; as a dialectician, he is far superior to B. He possesses all the seductive gifts of understanding and intellect; it thereby becomes more clear what makes B differ from him." (CUP, 253).[11] The real difference between A and B, says Climacus, is not between mature and immature thinking, but between existing and not existing. (CUP, 253). Perhaps Kierkegaard wants to be sure that *that* difference, whatever

[11] William himself says something similar, conceding to A that "I do not have your virtuosity in playing with categories" (EO II, 211).

it is (I hope will becomes clearer in Chapters Three to Five), is the one that people appreciate, and he makes William a bit flat footed just so that his reader will not make the mistake of thinking that it is any kind of sagacity that makes the difference between an esthetic and an ethical life.

So why *did* Kierkegaard make this pseudonym a judge? If it was not to signal that this is a man of critical judgment or experience, why? Another possibility that seems more promising is that William is a judge, as judge is by nature someone who respects the law. But here again one must be careful. Another set of assumptions a reader may be tempted to make about William has to do with William's apparent conservatism.

Certainly there is no question that William is a lover of laws and rules. William himself says he first detected the inclination as a boy when he studied Latin grammar. He reminisces somewhat preposterously on his days as a schoolboy, writing of "the contempt with which I looked down on the miserable life the [grammatical] exception endured, the to my eyes righteous way in which it was pursued in my exercise book and always stigmatized" (EO II, 269). As in grammar, William will proclaim love for the 'the universal'. It would pain William to think that he was some sort of exception to what he regards as universal duty. "[A]nyone who ventures on his own initiative is lost." he writes (SLW, 183). At one point he remarks that the ethical will show its devotee the "true joy of being the ordinary" (EO II, 304). Victor Emerita describes Judge William's handwriting as "distinct, somewhat drawn out, uniform, and even […]" (EO I, 7).

It is remarkable, then, that although this norm-loving characteristic of William's is sometimes presented in such a cartoonish way, yet, as I have noted above, the judge's

defense of marriage is never for a moment put in terms of the value of law, custom, or conformity considered in relation to society. William, for example, never recommends marriage or any of its elements to his reader because of his concern for the well-being of marriage or 'the family' as an institution, and he doesn't derive his recommendations from the importance of the institution as such for other aspects of human flourishing. In 18th and 19th century apologies for marriage, this was the standard approach. It had been for a long time. Christian writers such as Augustine and Aquinas, and modern philosophers such as for example Bacon, Hume, and in his own way Hegel put the way in which marriage contributes to the functioning and stability of society at the center of their discussions.[12] In other words, they write about marriage as an institution. William never does. William writes about what he calls the "validity of marriage". The word "validity", especially when spoken by a judge, might naturally make one think of the question of the validity of a specific union, a marriage made valid by a priest, a marriage rendered valid or invalid by this or that conformity to laws and customs—is she of age, is he already married, etc. But, quite strikingly, such things are not at all on William's mind. He concentrates wholly on the individual and the individual's own heart and happiness, on the well-being of his family, and on beauty. And considering it from the other side, in concentrating on the individual he does not argue for marriage because of the advantages to the individual that will be conferred on him by society, state, clan, or close relations when he weds. The latter wouldn't be quite so surprising today, but it is a

[12] For an example of a good contemporary defense of marriage from a social standpoint, see William Tucker, "Monogamy and its Discontents", in *Wing to Wing, Oar to Oar: Readings on Courting and Marriage,* ed. Amy Kass and Leon Kass (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000).

remarkable omission in mid 19th century Europe where marriage was still in many ways an initiation into a full membership in society, and a rite that, for example, often granted access to family property.[13] In general, William says very little about the history of marriage one way or another, and nothing at all about marriage law.[14] There is no hint of the nostalgia that marks so many apologists of matrimony then and now.[15] William never once appears to point to the past to say: they knew how to marry back then. Nor is William a traditionalist in the sense that he thinks that there is some sort of immemorial wisdom passed down and refined from generation to generation. At least, if he does believe such things, he never says so.

Similarly, William conspicuously passes on the idea that the marriage is about the new relationship that the couple bears to their community. One opportunity where William might have spoken of such things, as well as the institution of the extended family, is when he writes about the significance of the church ceremony itself. But there William instead says facetiously that the value of the ceremony in relation to the witnesses lies in the fact that isolated and miserable members of the community get a chance to have a little excitement in their lives for once by attending the wedding. The

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[13] See Elizabeth Abbott, *A History of Marriage* (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2010), 21.

[14] In one of the only times William mentions Danish law—not in his own writings but the account of William Afham (editor of *Stages)*—he makes a joke of it, reminding his wife that the laws of Denmark allow him to beat her to make her silent (SLW, 85). I examine this scene in detail in Chapter Five.

[15] *Contra* Bruce Kirmmse in his "MacIntyre and Kierkegaard: Possibilities for Dialogue" in John A. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (eds.), *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001) 135. Kindle.

wedding will be “something they can look forward to long in advance and remember long afterwards.“ He argues—I believe with some levity—that the couple ought to bear all the rigmarole for the benefit of these “frail” unfortunates. “Would you then rob such people of the opportunity for happiness that you could provide them?" (EO II, 103). In other words, William completely concedes to A that most of what the extended family brings in witnessing the wedding and celebrating it is unimportant. William boldly declares that he “despises” the vague and watered down "joint ownership" of extended family life in general. “If the marital love is a true first love, then there is also some concealment about it; it has no desire to make a display of itself, does not devote its life to appearing on all festive occasions, does not draw its nourishment from congratulations and compliments or from a divine worship as it can be arranged in the family.” (EO II, 104). The only value William puts on the community and extended family in relation to the marriage is that they give a sort of context within which the two spouses can nurse a special secrecy. Merold Westphal unaccountably (and citing no evidence from the text) writes that most of what William says about marriage consists “in learning to participate in a specific social practice”[16]. This is very strange because I feel confident that nothing William says ever consists in learning to participate in a specific social practice.[17]

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[16] Merold Westphal, “Kierkegaard and Hegel” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel,* ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 106.

[17] Westphal claims that Judge William’s role in *Either/Or* is to stand in for Hegel’s ethics of *Sittlichkeit* wherein the Good is “mediated through the laws and customs of one’s people”. (Westphal 106). I see little evidence for this, and Westphal offers none. For more of the (in my view indefensible) view that Kierkegaard’s ethical life-view is like Hegel’s *Sittlichkeit*, see also William MacDonald’s “Søren Kierkegaard” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/kierkegaard/. For a cogent rebuttal of this idea see Michael Watts, *Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003) 192-

Judge William, as I have said, is depicted as a lover of laws and rules. William can also appear to be conventional just because William doesn't ever appear to question the specific social and legal form of marriage in 19th century Denmark. Some commentators have concluded from this that William's aspiration is in fact to promote the social mores of his time. Alastair MacIntyre remarks that although much modern life is "almost intolerably conscious of rival moral alternatives", William appears not to

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What seems more promising is Jon Stewart's proposal that Judge William's concept of married love owes something to Hegel's treatment of what the latter calls "ethical love" in *Philosophy of Right* and *The Encyclopedia*. Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 229. Whether Kierkegaard thought of Judge William's ideas as an extrapolation of Hegel's "ethical love", however, is hard to know given the cursoriness of Hegel's treatments. Hegel writes that the spontaneous feelings of erotic love that come on us from nature are *aufgehoben* in a new 'ethical love' that exists in marriage. He writes in *Philosophy of Right,* for example: "A[n] unacceptable notion is that which simply equates marriage with love; for love, as a feeling, is open in all respects to contingency, and this is a shape which the ethical may not assume. Marriage should therefore be defined more precisely as rightfully ethical love, so that the transient, capricious, and purely subjective aspects of love are excluded from it." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right,* trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 201. As with Hegel's "ethical love", it is very important to William's conception of married love that it is not transient or capricious or contingent. But Hegel here indicates the love is transient and capricious *because love is a "feeling".* This makes one wonder whether by "ethical love" Hegel had in mind something like Kant's distinction between 'practical love' and 'pathological love', insofar as Kant thought of practical love as "residing in the will and not in the propensions of feeling". Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,* trans. H.J. Paton (New York, NY: Harper and Rowe, 1964) 67. As I read him, one of Judge William's great achievements is his articulation of a theory of love that rejects the Kantian dichotomy between feeling and duty. William's married man takes up duty for the sake of his erotic love.

Another aspect of Hegel's conception of "ethical love" that seems at odds with Judge William's is Hegel's emphasis on union. Hegel thinks that the essential thing in marriage is the desire of two individuals to "constitute a single person". (Hegel, *Philosophy of Right,* 201. To Hegel, this union is what constitutes "ethical love": "The *ethical* aspect of marriage consists in the consciousness of this union as a substantial end, and hence in love, trust, and the sharing of the whole of individual existence." (Hegel, *Philosophy of Right,* 202; Hegel's emphasis). This sort of union is an idea that William never so much as spares a word for.

worry at all about such questions, but seems to swallow whole all the norms of his own society. Kierkegaard's ethical man "has no great problems of interpretation [of what an ethical life is] once he has made his initial choice."[18] MacIntyre reads this as confirmation that William's project is ultimately to sure up traditional forms of life. In William, he concludes, Kierkegaard is "providing a new practical and philosophical underpinning for an older and inherited way of life."[19]

I'm not sure I agree with the premise that Judge William's view of marriage is conventional. William's obsession, and his message, is that we can and should marry for love. People had been saying this long before he came along, but to proclaim that this is the main issue in a marriage, overriding other considerations, and that for example, "a match in which erotic love has been omitted, whatever the reason, is no marriage." (SLW, 105) was quite progressive in the 1840s. If William had been conventional in matters of marriage, he would have said that marriage has to do with morality, with the order and shape of society, with God's will[20], and with practical concerns like

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[18] MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 43.

[19] Ibid

[20] At one point William explicitly considers the sort of marriage that would be motivated by God's injunction to multiply. He comments—"And yet such a marriage is as unnatural as it is arbitrary […]" (EO II, 70). As we will see in the next chapter, it is central to his account that erotic love is the marriage's ground, and that subsequently the marriage itself is its own "why". "Marriage can be undertaken with only one intention, whereby it is just as ethical as esthetic, but this intention is immanent; any other intention divides what belongs together and thereby makes finitudes of both the spiritual and the sensuous." (EO II, 72).

Clearly William takes himself to be a very religious man—he says that both he and his wife know that love of God is the highest, compared to which all other love is "nothing more than children's babbling." (EO II, 218). William thinks that the nature of the resolution with which we marry is religious in nature. Thus any full analysis of William's thought (which this thesis cannot be) would need to come to terms with

connections and money. If William had been conventional in matters of marriage he would have said that affection and love, insofar as these exist before the union, are a happy bonus. William does not say any of those things. It is true that there is little in

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William's conception of his own religiousness. And any full analysis of *Either/Or* would naturally want to question whether or how, from what Kierkegaard considered a truly religious point of view, William may be deficient. (Is this, for example, part of the point of the "Ultimatum", the sermon by the Jylland Pastor, that reminds esthetic and ethical man alike that in relation to the divine he is always in the wrong?)

What I will point out here, in line with what I have been saying, is that *William never invokes God's will as a reason to marry*. God's injunction to marry and multiply appears in the William texts not as a reason or ground but, rather, more like an opportunity or occasion or form with which the individuals can raise erotic love into the imperative mood, which is its perfection. Lowrie calls William "a moralist who is supported by conventional religious beliefs" (Lowrie, *A Short Life,* 150), but notably William never lets his actual argument be *supported* by Christian beliefs, for example by God's injunction to marry. The only thing that William argues *from,* the appeal he makes to his would-be husband, is the preservation of erotic love and beauty in marriage.

Here, for example, is a remark characteristic of William's attitude toward God's place in married life:

> You will not deny […] that it is natural for the first love to seek a confirmation by in one way or another making love an obligation, an obligation they impose upon themselves face to face with a higher power. The lovers swear faithfulness to each other by the moon, the stars, by the ashes of their fathers, by their honor, etc. If to that you say, "Well, such oaths are meaningless; they are merely a reflection of the lovers' own mood, for how would it otherwise occur to them to swear by the moon," then I would answer, "Here you yourself have altered the nature of the first love, for the very beauty of it is that everything acquires reality for it through the power of love; not until the moment of reflection does the meaninglessness of swearing by the moon become apparent; in the time of the oath, it has validity." Is this relation changed through their swearing by a power that actually does have validity? (EO II, 56).

To William, a religious mode of being is what the married man attains through his commitment, but he doesn't end up there because he wants to follow the commandments he learns in church. On William's account, instead, first love and its transfiguration into marriage moves man toward religiousness and God. In his signed work *On the Occasion of a Marriage*, the way Kierkegaard himself puts it is that the language of marriage is resolution, and resolution is "the only language in which God will involve himself with a human being." (OOW, 63).

William's writings that frets over what specific shape the institution of marriage takes. But he doesn't defend that shape as such either.[21]

William is not much of a critic of his society, it is true. But there are two ways to interpret this feature of Kierkegaard's pseudonym. For one thing, this could be because William is supposed to be some sort of conservative. But as I've pointed out, I see little else to support this. Alternatively, it could be that William is not a critic of his society because William *is somehow, deep in his nature, not a critic.* He is not a critic of the particular shape of his society's marriage customs any more than he is a critic of his wife's physical or moral qualities. William is a willful judge. William, in his judgments—such as the judgment that marriage is good—speaks not from a place of detachment and scrutiny of this and that alternative. He speaks from devotion. Devotion starts with what it is given.

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[21] One exception to this is that William is quite conservative when it comes to the husband's rule and the wife's subservience. He vehemently "hates" women's liberation. "God forbid that it may ever happen. I cannot tell you with what pain the thought can pierce my soul, nor what passionate indignation, what hate, I harbor toward anyone who dares to express such ideas." (EO II, 311). He froths at the thought that men and women will one day wear the same clothes: "Just imagine this atrocity" (EO II, 312).

This certainly makes it look like William is a spitting reactionary. But again, notably, he never pursues this argument against women's liberation by way of social good or tradition. He does not complain that this will destroy the fabric of family life or some such thing. William's rejection of women's liberation has to do instead with his championing of the ethical over the esthetic life and the role he sees marriage playing in it. William thinks that woman lack a capacity for reflection (SLW, 166). Women enter the ethical and religious "directly", without needing to wed erotic love to resolution as a man must. However arrogant, absurd, and backward this claim about women and reflection itself may be, my point is that William's apparent defense of the *status quo* in relation to the sexes is in fact secondary to his views of how the two sexes become ethical, not *vice versa*.

4: Doubt

Kierkegaard puts the argument he makes on marriage in the mouth of a pseudonym. Furthermore, the pseudonym is not just a name that masks Kierkegaard's own, but a particular personality, with characteristic features. Judge William's personality is marked, above all, by conviction. The point of showing, above, that William is not an old wise man, or a practically wise man, or a conservative in any familiar form, is to show that this conviction is not a byproduct of one of these other traits that have been attributed to him. His conviction is, rather, the essential thing about him. As I read *Either/Or,* William's conviction is supposed to be taken by the reader to be a potential problem. But we are given the materials to resolve the problem from within the work. Or: resolving the puzzle of William's personality is, for the reader of William's works, the same as understanding the nature of true marriage. Specifically, William in fact has an important point to make about what he calls doubt in relation to erotic love.

What does William mean when he talks about doubt? In English, to doubt has a few different meanings. To doubt may be to be uncertain. Or 'doubt' can be used in a stronger sense of disbelief: to be a doubter is to think that such and such is probably not the case, in spite of the fact that it had previously or popularly been credited. Alternatively, to doubt may be to take a skeptical stance as a rule: to withhold one's credence from all but what has been proved (up to some standard or other).

'Doubt', in William's account, seems rather closest to what we would call objectivity. To doubt is to hold up critical objectivity as a rule in one's thoughts. William writes,

> Doubt is the inner movement in thought itself, and in my doubt I conduct myself as impersonally as possible. I assume that thought, when doubt is carried through, finds the absolute and rests therein; therefore, it rests therein not pursuant to a choice but pursuant to the same necessity pursuant to which it doubted, for doubt itself is a qualification of necessity, and likewise rest. (EO II, 211).

When William says that in doubt I "conduct myself as impersonally as possible", this is what I take him to mean, at a minimum: When we doubt, we assume that there is some knowable matter of fact that exists independently of our own received ideas or beliefs about it and our own conative comportment toward it—in William's terms, we assume that there is an "absolute that thought can come to rest in." Doubting is not the same thing as possessing objective knowledge. Doubt is, rather, a sort of sterilization with which one creates the conditions we need for objective knowledge. In doubt we undo, among other things, the willfulness with which we would warp our reception of the truth. We are never without wishes when it comes to the truth. So to doubt, to be a doubter, is also always to actively set about to stand at some remove from our own biases, our own need for order, our own expectations and hopes.

In so many cases, of course, what William calls doubt is the approach to knowledge that we demand of each other and ourselves. It is how we have to conduct ourselves if we want to draw legitimate conclusions. A scientist seeks to be a doubter in William's sense. Measuring the effects of climate change on a population of snails on

Cape Cod, as a matter of principle the conchologist doesn't want anything about his own expectations, stake in the results, etc., to influence his work. He doesn't want his findings to be in any way skewed by the fact that he is already in print saying such and such, or that he gets his funding from So and so. He seeks, rather, to follow the facts wherever they lead him. His conclusions are the conclusions anyone else, doing the same work properly, would arrive at—it has nothing to do with him personally. He also, naturally, doesn't want his own act of observing or experimenting to itself be a source of change in the behavior of the snails he is studying.

This sounds, of course, perfectly sensible to the point of being indispensable to very idea of what knowledge can amount to. What is any observation, what is any claim to know, if the thing is not known, in principle, in the existence it has apart from the observer's own act of observation, and from the observer's practical projects and concerns? Surely something counts as knowledge when the mind is made to fit the world, which categorically excludes the possibility that the world could simultaneously be shaped by our own convictions.

What William would say about (what we today mean by) science and scientific study of, for example, the behavior of snails, is beyond the bounds of this thesis. What we (and William) are interested in is what happens when someone invites this mode of detachment into their own personal life. In particular, William says that when one is in first love, to turn one's attention upon the question of one's own heart objectively—as, on my interpretation, my minister wanted my wife and I to do—would be, if one were really capable of carrying it through, a disaster. Real doubt is poison even to a thriving first love. William's seemingly hyperbolic claim is that "the moment [first love] doubts it is

annihilated." (EO II, 94).

This is, I take it, meant to be a surprising and counterintuitive thought. Why should doubt in this sense of objectivity cause erotic love to falter? To reflect in the mode of doubt is to aspire to see oneself as one actually already is, and not as one wants to be. If doubting means that I ask myself, setting aside what I wish or expect to be the case, whether I do love my fiancée, or whether I will go on loving her, then if his answer is 'yes', surely there has been no harm. And if the answer is 'no', it would seem, then, that the doubting itself has not caused the damage but discovered it. Yet William wants to claim, contrary to this, that the doubting does the damage—the moment first love doubts it is annihilated. Toward the beginning of his first letter, when William is wondering how to add reflection to erotic love, he considers (and ultimately rejects) the possibility that marital love begins in doubt. There he takes it for granted that this would destroy the first love, and uses the same language of "annihilation": "The question is whether it belongs essentially to marriage to annihilate the first love by doubting the possibility of realizing it…" (EO II, 29). Even if I really do love my fiancée, in doubting, in setting aside what I wish was the case, I annihilate my love.

But why does doubt destroy love? The answer, I believe, has to do with what I laid out in the last chapter about the nature of first love and the 'qualification of eternity'. The problem lies in the fact that in the case of our own heart our contemporary convictions on the subject are essential to the existence of the love itself.

In most cases, believing in something has no effect on whether or not the thing that you believe in is actually true. I can believe that Elvis lives; but my belief one way or the other has no influence on the matter. Every person on the planet could believe that

Elvis lives, and this would have no bearing on whether or not he does. But perhaps there are realms of life where this kind of independence gets less clear cut. To take an everyday example, it is often heard of athletes that they can do such and such only if they believe that they can do it. Let us imagine a marathon runner. When Katie runs a marathon, let us say, her best time is around four hours. And let's say, for the sake of example, that on a particular day, at a particular race, Katie can run a four-hour marathon, but only if she is sustained by the conviction that she can do it. Katie, as an athlete, is constituted such that in order for Katie to run this marathon on under four hours she must hold the belief that this something she is capable of doing.

Now from a certain point of view, the question: 'Can Katie run today's marathon in four hours?' is a question about a fact in the world like any other. If, say, someone asks Katie's running coach this question, nothing prevents him from answering about what is, to him, a matter of fact. Certainly he can try to give his answer apart from what he wishes was the case. His reasons for the answer he gives may have to do with what he knows of Katie's health, the humidity, and all sorts of other considerations. And it is no different, for him, when he factors in what he knows of Katie's morale on that particular day. Her actual state of conviction in relation to the race itself can in principle be, for her coach, one more contributing factor like the others in the objective fact of the matter that is her ability to run the four-hour marathon.

The interesting thing, for our purposes, is the way in which this same inquiry becomes more complicated when someone asks Katie herself the question. What would happen if Katie were to successfully take up the question in the mode of doubt as William conceives of it? In doubt, as William puts it, Katie will conduct herself as impersonally as

possible, and actively move to consider the subject under the "qualification of necessity". That is, Katie will set to one side and stand aloof from her own standing attitudes about the subject in order to instead come to a conclusion on the matter through her reflection. And herein lies the problem. In order to doubt in this way, Katie must recuse the very conviction that would have enabled her to run the marathon in under four hours. Thus in doubting, by doubting, Katie's answer must become 'No, I cannot run the marathon in under four hours'. (And *ex hypothesi* 'no' will thereby become the correct answer).[22]

I think that what William is trying to say about the 'annihilating' effect of doubt on first love is similar to this. We can see why doubt is threatening to first love by paying close attention to what we said before about the sense in which first love is eternal and exists at all times, "containing the whole". In the context of first love, doubt, if it were possible, would be reflection in which one attends to the contents of one's own heart with real detachment. But that is either impossible or it is destructive. First love exists in the lover as the complex emotional projection of the perceived possibility of the love itself. One lives in light of a lifetime of love, and naively inhabits it. Karl Ove's joy at spending the afternoon having a coffee with Linda, of meeting her friends, of sleeping with her, are

[22] Perhaps this inability of doubt, in the sense of objectivity, to inquire into one's own first love, is one productive way to approaching what Kierkegaard himself took to be the great epiphany of *Either/Or,* that, in the words of the Jylland Pastor "Only the truth that builds up is truth for you" (EO II, 354). This is far too large a topic for this thesis. But if part of the essence of doubt is to find the truth without the inquiry itself influencing it, then doubt seems to fail on its own terms in cases like Katie and her inquiry into her own ability to run a four-hour marathon. Doubt has, in fact, influenced the case itself by the very impersonal mode that it requires of the person performing the doubting. Perhaps this begins to get at what William means when he writes, "The supposed objectivity that doubt has, and because of which it is so exalted, is a manifestation precisely of its imperfection." (EO II, 212).

all inextricably linked to his perception of a larger life of love he sees the two of them as able to live out. He is simultaneously at the coffee shop on some particular day, and he dwells in the whole, which he believes has obtained. To exclude the influence of one's own projection in relation to that possibility in order for one's opinion to instead be informed passively is to simultaneously suspend an essential part of erotic love's vital inner dynamics. In the previous chapter I compared first love to a small slide through which we project an image on a wall. The slide is like the present love, and the projection on the wall is like a whole life lived as a fulfillment of that emotional love. One only sees and appreciates the image on the slide by way of its projection, and *vice versa.* For Karl Ove to really set aside (in what way this is even possible is unclear) his own convictions and wonder, in an open way, whether he loves Linda, would be to remove the slide. For Karl Ove to really set aside his own convictions and wonder, in an open way, whether he will continue to love Linda, would be to remove the wall. There can be no first love if we do not live in light of a life of love.

Let's return for a moment to the William's stubbornness. Perhaps when William touts his stubbornness he is not, as it might seem (though we certainly seem to be meant to be tempted, as readers, to misunderstand him this way), expressing that the best way to enjoy life is to live a lie, or to never look too closely into the truth of one's own relationships. Rather, William is objecting to the thought that one can approach the contents of one's own heart as a discrete to-be-discovered measurable value that one could know, as he puts it, 'impersonally', apart from our own yearnings in relation to its existence. And he has real reasons to do so. It is the *modus operandi* of doubt to remove

any trace of one's own willfulness from the sterile dish in which the subject is scrutinized, so that it can be studied unadulterated by these things. *But it so happens that it is the nature of first love to live on this willfulness.* William writes, "The supposed objectivity that doubt has, and because of which it is so exalted, is a manifestation precisely of its imperfection." (EO II, 212). In the case of first love, the love itself of course has the power to make things happen in the world: to bring together two people and overcome obstacles that might prevent the love from flourishing. First love also has a special kind of interpersonal power, whereby its revelation in one person inspires itself reciprocally in another. But—and here is the part we're carrying over from Chapter One—the erotic love itself is also inspired by the perception of a perceived possibility. This means that one's own conviction is itself a factor in whether the thing that the lover perceives is in fact able to come about. One's beliefs in relation to love run ahead to make the thing that we wish was the case come to really be possible.

This is the right way to interpret William's diagnosis of A and his approach to love. A is skeptical of the eternity of erotic love. But in being skeptical of it, he doesn't discover the truth about it, but actually causes corruption in it. He causes it to fail. Thus for the inveterate doubter, the apparent truth will always be the same in regard to first love: that it was an illusion. A blames the failure of his attempt to enjoy life on the nature of life itself. But really it is his own reflective mode—his doubt—that makes every enjoyment slip through his fingers.

The only competence that William claims for the task of defending marriage is that he has conviction. "My conviction, then, is my one and only justification, and in turn the guarantee for my firm conviction is the weight of the responsibility under which my

life, like every married man's life, is placed." (SLW, 91). It turns out that that can actually make a kind of sense.

This all might strike the reader as a bit fussy. Is it really the case that first love is so anemic that it can be "annihilated" by a little self-scrutiny? What is really at stake in this discussion of doubt, either for William's account or for our ultimate goal of understanding the marriage vow? As I understand it, this discussion of doubt is valuable because it begins to make clear what the transfiguration of erotic love in marriage cannot involve: it cannot be something, as we might have assumed, that is strengthened by standing back from our own expectations and passing a proposed change in life through the kind of reflection he calls doubt. It cannot be that the fragility of first love is sured up by reflecting on our reasons and making a decision in the ordinary sense. And this rules out one very intuitive way of approaching what a marriage is, how a married man is different from a mere lover, what kind of an act marrying is. To marry *cannot be* to make the transition from an immediate and spontaneous love for So and so, to a resolution to love her that is our own will insofar as it is more thought through, considered, calculated, weighed, in a way that involves, or gets its validity from, an ideal of objectivity. That cannot be the difference. In the language of contemporary philosophy, it cannot be that the commitment is arrived at through, or constituted by, reflective endorsement.

So see this more clearly, let us now turn to a discussion of decision, which will bring us to the second of the two main concepts that form the basis of William's theory of marriage: the concept of choosing oneself. As we will see in the next chapter, in most

decisions, the decision is based on deliberation, and the deliberation follows the same rule as doubt: its very essence and legitimacy lies, in part, in the idea that we set aside and temporarily suspend our own prior orientation to the subject in question. This is how one can be sure that one's decision follows from one's reasons, and not that one's reasons are contrived to fit the course of action one had already set for oneself. The decision, in other words, is not a mere rationalization. According to William, we will never understand marriage and married life, and the "I do", if we see the "I do" as the manifestation of a decision of this kind. It is William's task in *Esthetic Validity of Marriage* to illuminate a different kind of decision, which he calls "choosing". As William puts it, "[T]he intention here is not the acquired fruit of doubt but the overabundance of the promise." (EO II, 61).

Chapter Three: Decision

> It is true that love proceeds from the heart, but let us not be hasty about this and forget the eternal truth that love forms the heart.
>
> -Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*[1]

1: Transformation through decision

In Chapter One we explored Judge William's theory of first love. In first love, an individual "possesses the whole." First love is delightful and full of beauty in the present, and this pathos projects a possibility out from itself in a vision of a whole life. This vision, in turn, reciprocally invests one's own experience of the beloved with intensity.

This first love is very intense, but it is also illusory if it remains something that is merely suffered, as the romantic and reflective ages imagine it to be. William says that for first love to be preserved it must be transformed through reflection. But what does this reflection consist in? In Chapter Two we saw something of what this reflection *cannot* consist in. The change cannot be that the individual has grounded his love on reasons by reflecting on it in the mode of doubt, detachment, looking for some truth of the matter of one's own desires and their legitimacy that exists independently of one's willfulness in relation to them. Doubt annihilates first love because it suspends the optative mood that in part constitutes all erotic love. To bring love to its true perfection the individual must, rather, reflect in the mode of resolution. William writes, "[T]he true eternity requires a

[1] WL, 12.

determination of the will." (EO II, 22). But what is this determination of the will? In this chapter, the aim is to describe William's conception of choosing.

On the way to doing this, I am going to begin by discussing, at a very general level, some features of all decisions, and why we make them. I think it will be worthwhile to lay on the table some basic characteristics of human decision making, even if some of it will seem obvious. I am then going to characterize what I call a deliberative decision. A deliberative decision is a decision in which our will follows from reasons that we weigh in reflection. A deliberative decision has legitimacy, in part, because the individual reaches it after suspending, in the space of the deliberation, his own prior intentions toward the action in question. These intentions are suspended in the sense that he does not, in principle, allow them to either be, or to affect, the basis of his decision. This I will gradually distinguish from what William calls a choice. William does not talk about 'deliberative decisions'—it is my own wording—and he spends none of the time I am going to spend in this chapter explaining the relationship between decision and doubt. He simply speaks of the ethical choice as though this was the only real kind of decision in a person's life. In this thesis my strategy will be to go slower, to sure up an aspect of the argument that I think is vital to the reader's (and my own) understanding the nature of modern marriage.

I will argue that in William's terms a choice is a determination of one's own will, based on something in ourselves (in this case, the first love), that itself acquires authority and substance in our life going forward that is not directly reducible to the reasons we had for making it. It is in this last characteristic, the way in which the decision takes on a life of its own in the individual, that I believe begins to get at what William puts his

finger on in his concept of choice and resolution. Like a decision by way of doubt, choice happens through a kind of reflection. But it is not reflection in which we stand at some detachment from our own prior intentions, and eventually abrogate them. Instead, it is reflection in which an intention itself comes to illuminate the world for us and the beauty in it.

The choice that creates marriage and marital love is primarily described by William in three related ways: (A) Rather than remaining dependent, for its validity, upon our reasons for entering into it, the choice creates an "inner law of motion", where the reasons one has for making the choice grow in us with the choice, as the choice "penetrates" everything in one's life. In this, (B) the marriage itself becomes the new object of one's erotic energy. Finally (C) the choice makes the erotic love capable of having a history, and makes what would be external opposition to it into inner challenges for the individual to meet in relation to the resolution itself. I will interpret (A) and (B) in the second half of this chapter and Chapter Four. In Chapter Five I will try to elucidate (C).

2: Deliberative decisions

Merriam Webster's Dictionary defines a decision as "a determination arrived at after consideration". There is such a thing as decisions because we are the kind of creature that is capable of determining our will through some sort of deliberation. By deliberation I mean any process by which we bring before ourselves our own beliefs, and our own

desires, needs, responsibilities, etc., and, in light of these things, come up with what we're going to do. Of course it is possible to make a decision without having engaged in much in the way of a thoughtful, discrete deliberation. But the point is not really that one has some focused, dedicated time or procedure. The point is that, in a decision, one holds or appreciates that such and such facts, feelings, values, etc., are good reasons; and, in principle, one bases one's decision on them. Once in a while we speak of a decision that is arbitrary. But this strikes me as parasitic on the idea of a decision for which we have reasons. If we were a creature for whom every determination to action was arbitrary, then there would be no such thing as decisions.

For the moment, let's leave wide open what sort of action we're talking about. I can decide to take a sip of water. Then again I can decide to forgive a friend for mistreatment. The latter is in general much more slippery, in part just because I don't have as much control over my attitudes and the case admits of so much self-deception. For now, though, such differences are beside the point. The very general idea, for now, is just that in a decision, in principle, we determine our own will to act in relation to some outcome, on some basis.

In what way does the content of our reflection relate to the action that we decide on? In most decisions, *the course of action we set ourselves follows from our reasons we hold.* At its best, such a decision is the opposite of what we call a rationalization, when we come up with such and such 'reasons' as a pretense, to justify the direction we're already set on taking.

This makes it sound simple indeed. "Ought I to do A or B? Well, let me now consider the reasons." In real life, however, our intentions in relation to A and B are

seldom so undetermined. One is always living with things that one has expected to do, things that one has been doing. To be human is to always already be on some sort of path, to have some identity, or have some set way of responding to the world and acting in it, however muddled or ambivalent one is about it. This is why doubt (in William's sense) can be so important to making good and legitimate decisions so much of the time. Quite often, in order to make a sound decision, one has to stand back and consider the reasons one has for such and such a course of action independently of any intentions one (or others who have some sort of influence over one) have heretofore entertained in relation to that same course of action. Importantly, the person who is to be married is, William thinks, always in this position: she already has a path that she is on. Because she is in first love, she intends to love So and so for eternity. In doubt (in William's way of using that word), we said, one inquires into something in an objective way: in a way such that one tries to find the fact of the matter (in this case the value of such and such an action) independently of one's own prior personal attitude about it, of one's hopes and expectations and standing practical projects on the same matter.

This open perspective is not always easy to accomplish. There is, in fact, a kind of excellence to doubt in decision making. Consider, for example, how Obama describes his decision not to invade Syria in 2013. As is now well-trod recent history, in September of 2013, U.S. military intervention of some sort (bombings, to begin with) in Syria came to seem unavoidable. Obama had uncharacteristically drawn a 'red line' before the use of chemical weapons one year before, and the Assad regime transgressed that line by murdering an estimated 1000 civilians with what is believed to have been Serin gas. The President intended to strike. In the days leading up to the impending U.S. engagement,

however, Obama became, in the words of Jeffrey Goldberg, writing in *The Atlantic*, "plagued by doubts".[2] And ultimately, to the surprise of everyone, he decided against the actions. By Obama's account this was not primarily because the situation changed or new information came to light. It was, instead, because he engaged in reflection. Obama himself describes the story this way, as told to Goldberg:

> The overwhelming weight of conventional wisdom and the machinery of our national-security apparatus had gone fairly far. The perception was that my credibility was at stake, that America's credibility was at stake. And so for me to press the pause button at that moment, I knew, would cost me politically. And the fact that I was able to pull back from the immediate pressures and think through in my own mind what was in America's interest, not only with respect to Syria but also with respect to our democracy, was as tough a decision as I've made—and I believe ultimately it was the right decision to make.[3]

Obama's language of "pulling back" from a settled and expected (by both himself and others) course of action goes to the heart of what deliberative decision making, and doubt, can be at its best. He considered: is this the right path for our country? To do so he had to disentangle his own thoughts on that question from the momentum in his cabinet, the "overwhelming weight of conventional wisdom" among foreign policy people, etc., to

[2] Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine", *The Atlantic,* April 2016.

[3] Ibid.

go to war—all of whom themselves live in a nexus of their own personal and political inertia. He also had to step back from his own previous intentions and statements of his intentions, and even his threats. Perhaps most difficult, he had to separate the question of what would be best for the country from the question of what would severely embarrass him. If you like Obama, this may be the sort of thing that you admire about him. Even if you don't, you can see that in his words to Goldberg he is attempting to appeal to a kind of nobility we can innately appreciate.

This is what I take a deliberative decision to be, insofar as it relates to doubt: a procedure in which the aim is to stand away from our own prior expectations and resolutions, and instead let the decision follow from our reasons in the reflection. So in a deliberative decision that employs doubt, the idea is that we reach a valid decision by (in part) invalidating our own prior conclusions on the subject in the space of the deliberation. People do this on a smaller scale all the time.

Something that is important to note is that the imperative of detachment in deliberative decision making should not be confused with the idea that one must invalidate one's own desires or other personal or psychological motives as reasons in the new reflection. In the doubt I am speaking of (at least at this point in the argument), what one suspends is not the premises of one's practical life (e.g. one's desires), but one's own prior practical intentions to act in relation to the same subject under consideration, and any influence the latter might have on one's premises. Thus a desire, even a base or insistent or irrational or passing desire, could in principle be the basis of a deliberative decision as I conceive of it. To apply this to the case at hand, someone could in a sense step back from his or her intentions to get married, or to be married, so that they can say

to themselves: "Hold on. I know I said I would do this, but what is it that I really do want out of life? What do I honestly feel toward this person?" This could, in principle, be a way to try to undertake a deliberative decision.[4]

It is perfectly possible to get legally married in 19th century Denmark, or married today, from a deliberative decision. What is required for it to be a sound deliberative decision is just this: the decision has validity insofar as we have in some sense stepped back from any the pressures and previous intentions and brought before ourselves the reasons we have to be with So and so, what kind of life it is going to be, etc. But William's point about reflection and resolution and doubt, as I understand it, is that erotic love is of such a nature that it cannot serve as a reason in a deliberative decision regarding the fate of the love itself. And for this reason, such a decision cannot be how we make the transition to true marital love. If there is some sense in the phrase that we

[4] Nor does the difference between a decision by doubt and a choice have to do with whether we think that others ought to make the same decision. The reason that is the basis of a decision by doubt could, in principle, be a value or motive that is itself idiopathic. (On the other hand, you could in principle undertake what I will later describe as a choice—something that is not and cannot be a decision by doubt—that you think is an inalienable task and responsibility of all people, for example the decision to love God). The point is, rather, that in order to make a good rational decision, sometimes the procedure essentially exists in a space that recognizes no prior investment of one's own will in one option over another. Instead, the will shall be determined by the deliberation.

Furthermore, as I understand it the difference doesn't cut along the lines of whether the determining factor is a low or high-order desire, in the sense given to these terms by Harry Frankfurt. In principle a deliberative decision can be made that takes as its reason some high-order attitude we have toward our own desires or our own volition. Jean may choose not to have coffee with Avaz because she doesn't wish her dormant feelings for Avaz to be reawakened. This can be deliberative decision like any other. I see no reason to think that there is anything special about it just because the reason for the decision happens to be what Jean wishes in regard to her own volition.

"marry for love"—and William thinks that there is—then the conception of the legitimacy of a decision we see in a deliberative decision does not supply us with right paradigm to understand it.

It is not possible to simultaneously stand back and ask ourselves whether we want to go on loving someone *and* consult our own feelings about that in the deliberation. We cannot ask ourselves: 'Shall I love So and so forever?' in the same way that Obama asked: 'Should America drop bombs in Syria?' To ask in that way would be to suspend the very conviction that in part constitutes the inner dynamics of the first love. In short: erotic love does not survive suspension of willfulness. Shall I marry Susan and promise to love her forever? What it is to really raise that question in the mode of doubt is to suspend in the soul my prior answer to it. But if I really succeeded in doing this then the erotic love would not be there in me to then act as a basis for a "yes" decision. The erotic love was in part animated by the answer that I already had to that question.

Certainly a lover could toy with such a question, could poke and prod such a question, but to actually undergo true doubt is another matter. I, although I am married, am able to in a sense imagine, in some hypothetical way, what I would say if I were asked whether this married life is a good choice. But this is not the same as actually alienating from oneself one's resolution and somehow suspending all the ways that this resolution penetrates one's attitudes about things, one's feel for the beauty of one's life and the people in it. In other words, it is not the same as what it would actually take to doubt my marriage.

3: Decisions that stand

Surely, one would think, in order for there to be such a thing as a rational choice, the choiceworthiness to us of an action must exist independently of one's own will in relation to it. What is left of the idea of a decision if we abandon the idea that a decision's legitimacy in part derives from reasons rather than from one's own prior intentions? Won't it then be, to some degree, an arbitrary decision? William is not interested in arbitrary decisions and neither are we in this thesis. We are interested in a case when we marry for love. The decision has a basis: it is erotic love. Somehow love is the basis for the decision to marry. But apparently it must be so in such a way that the decision does not follow the rule of doubt. How can this be?

Let us go back again to the question of what a decision most basically is. Let us ask again: Why is there such a thing as decision? We said before that we are a creature that makes decisions because we are a creature capable of choosing a course of action on some basis, and of making an effort to get it right. But we can be more specific about the kind of decision that matters in this discussion. Sometimes a person makes a decision in the sense that they elect to do such and such, and with no more ado they perform the act in question. It is time for Tom to choose a flavor of ice cream. Tom says "vanilla". The vanilla is scooped. In a case like this, Tom's choice connects directly to the event in the world that it is about. As for the decision in Tom's life going forward, it may be that the decision is, as it were, no sooner made than it becomes part of Tom's mere history. Even if he, at the first bite, regretted opting for vanilla, vanilla would no less be Tom's choice.

Although clearly this is a perfectly ordinary and fine use of the English word "decision", in another sense an electing or opting of this kind is a decision only in a weak sense. What we are interested in is a little different: when a person makes a decision, and then continues to carry that decision in him as his standing will. As Harry Frankfurt points out, the English word 'decision' comes from the Latin phrase meaning "to cut off".[5] In a decision, we stop, or 'cut off', what was an open process of deliberation. Whereas, before the decision, there was uncertainty or ambivalence about what we willed, now that we have decided the will is settled. Thus the thing that is really rendered in a decision is not, in the first, a practical act, but something *about our own will and person.* The whole point of a decision (and the sense in pointing out that the deliberation is cut off,) is that the decision, as we say, stands. A decision resounds. A decision results in a resolution that, for the time being, is our will. For this reason, when it is used in this stronger sense the word 'decision' has a sort of semantic duplexity. Speaking of "the decision" one can refer, on the one hand, to the event of making up one's mind on such and such a Tuesday; or "the decision" can refer to the resolution—the chosen course of action—that one now carries. This duplexity is not an ambiguity in our language so much as usage that reflects what decisions actually are and how they work in a human life: a decision is a determination of the will that we make at one time that then is bourn by us into practical life.

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[5] Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 172. The distinction I am making between an election and a decision is similar to one Frankfurt makes in this essay between, in his terms, "choosing", the object of which is some thing that we want, and "decision", the object of which something about our own volition. Because of the very different conceptual load William invests in the word "choosing" in the Hong translation I am using, I do not adopt this terminology in the thesis in general.

When a decision stands, it seems, it always involves a minor paradox. We are a creature capable of making decisions because we are a creature capable of basing what we do on good reasons. And yet it seems that if we continue to operate as though the matter is fully open to the same sort of thought and consideration that went into making the decision—or just as open as it was before—then there has been no decision. At the time that the decision is made, we try to base our decision on the best reasons. However, it would be wrong to say that when the time comes to act on the resolution, the resolution reraises the reasoning in order to marshal this against any new considerations on the spot. Rather, we've made up our mind. Rather, the resolution we carry becomes (temporarily) a stand-in for the authority of one's own rational capacities. A decision is not merely a summation of our current thinking on such and such, that can be just as freely added to or adjusted after the decision is settled as before. It is not supervenient upon holding such and such to be good reasons. If something can be reraised with no ado, then we don't say that we've made a decision, but use some other phrase: we have a 'plan' or some such thing.

Now we can ask: Why do we make fully fledged decisions that stand, as opposed to making mere elections and having mere plans? Why not leave the will undetermined, remain open minded, and take a direction only when the time of action arrives and we have all the most up to date information? A different way of asking the same question is: A decision's authority is not derived directly from the reasons we appreciate at the time of action. Where, then, does its authority come from? One kind of answer, I take it, will bring us closer to what William calls "choosing onself". I will get to this in the next section. First, there are other ways it makes sense for a decision to have authority in us

apart from the authority of good reasons. It will be useful to lay these out first so that they will not be confused with the former.

Among the ways that a decision, rather than a mere election, can be needed by us, two general kinds stand out. First, (i) a decision can have authority because there is some extrinsic good that comes from having *some* firm decision. The good is extrinsic in the sense that this benefit is not the same as the benefit of making a relatively better decision. The decision need not be arbitrary—we may do our best to make a good one—but in this case the fact that the decision has weight with us may be fully or in part derived from something other than the idea that we made a better one. We might, for example, choose a course of action and stick to it because at some point dithering on it is itself too costly to be worth it. Or, on a very different note, we might make a decision that stands because we are working in a group, and revisiting and reraising our plans all the time would harm its cohesion. Very different again from both of these, Frankfurt posits that sometimes we make decisions because we have a human need to bring our will into a coherent unity, and we can only do this when we have some aspect of the will settled.[6] These are three very different ways a decision can itself be an extrinsic good, but for our purposes in each case the decision would bear its own weight in the same general sort of way: sometimes there is a value *to having some decision* that is independent of the value of getting it right, thus independent of the relative choiceworthiness of one option over another.

Another, entirely different, way in which it can make sense to make a decision

[6] Frankfurt, *Importance,* 175.

that stands is this: (ii) a decision can have validity insofar as we have reason to believe that we made the decision under good conditions to see clearly and choose the best path. We then carry that decision into the messy and confusing fray of life. There are, surely, circumstances in life under which one tends to make good choices for one's overall health or happiness or goodness, and circumstances when one tends to make poor ones. And sometimes it is predictable which is which. Sometimes the good condition for making a decision is simply that we have time to think things through. But there are other good conditions as well. Dan might make the decision, waking up in a hospital bed one morning: 'I will never again touch alcohol.' To Dan, the whole point of making a decision of this kind is so that the clarity and perspective he possesses at that time will take precedence over other specious thinking, when Dan is in very different circumstances; when he out with his old buddies, when it may seem harmless to have a drink. Dan's decision will have weight with him, as I understand it, in the following way: the resolution is not made so that the resolution can recall to Dan's mind Dan's good reasoning on the spot, so that this side of the argument can win again. It exists in him, rather, with a different kind of warrant: a legitimacy derived, ultimately, from what we might call the conditions of clarity under which the resolution was made, the stamp of which itself gives Dan, anywhere, a good reason to think that this a better choice for him than he will come up with on the fly. To allow each newest opportunity for thought to abrogate what went before is one way to have poor judgment.[7]

[7] I bring up these ways in which a standing decision can have authority so that they can be contrasted to the very different way that what William calls choosing oneself has substance in us. But we can reflect for a moment on how these two forms of validity that a decision can have do not fit the case of a modern marriage. We have already begun one approach to why a deliberative decision cannot explain the phenomenon of marrying for

In both of the possibilities I've just brought up, the decision is a decision in a strong sense, and has authority, insofar as its validity is not derived directly from reasons that are present to the individual. But in both cases the authority is still, of course, derivative. In (ii) the validity of the decision is still dependent on the idea that the selection we made was better for us than the other options. In other words its validity in fact derives from the reasons, it just does so in a way that is mediated through the

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love—that it does not survive the suspension of our own intentions. But it is worth our while to appreciate the problem from this other angle as well.

First, in regard to (i), the extrinsic good of having the matter settled. Maybe there are people for whom the decision to marry could have some extrinsic good in this sense—say, the disruption of reraising the decision that they made to marry So and so would be too distressing to ever be worth it. But only if they approach marriage from well outside the cultural ideal. This is far too anemic to capture the sense in which the decision to marry is supposed to stand in a husband or wife's will through time. One is married when one bears a decision not just in the sense that one is sticking to it, but in the sense that one continues to hold in one's heart the belief that this marriage is vital for one's life, *and the power of the decision—and of the marriage—in one, derives from this belief*. The validity of (i) could be part of an explanation of marriage, but not part of an explanation that wanted to defend modern marriage's core ideal of marrying for love.

A somewhat stronger case can be made for (ii), the idea that the validity of a marriage derives from the good conditions for choosing that were present when the choice was made. There will be passing phases in any person's emotional life when belonging to a marriage holds no charm. Clearly in some cases this can be a kind of derangement. A marriage, as a decision with the weight of one's past reasons, can hold us steady through these trials. In the intoxicating presence of Marilynne Monroe, we can trust the man we were when we made our vows, until the summer ends. But for the most part this is very problematic in relation to modern marriage. I take it that when a marriage falls apart today, it isn't usually because something is temporarily tampering with a spouse's judgment. It is because one or both of the spouses, rather, made a mistake long ago about who they actually are, or because there has been a real, seismic shift in what they want out of life. Or it is because the relationship has become somehow infected with resentment or distrust. Or—and here is the outcome that both "A" and William are focused on— somehow the fire has simply gone out. They no longer love each other. And this is precisely when the decisions of the past can really make no claim to conditions of clarity on the prospect of the marriage. It is absurd to think that the twenty-three year old groom who was so smitten was in a better position for good judgment on how the forty-three-year-old husband ought to live than he who has actually made a go of it for two decades.

question of whether or when we have good access to them. In (i) the value of the decision derives from something else entirely: the value, to us, of having the matter settled.

This brings us to what Judge William calls choosing. Or, rather, it brings us to a boundary, beyond which is William's concept of choosing. William wants to posit that in a choice, the choice itself acquires an original and intrinsic validity to us in a more radical sense than we see in (i) or (ii). A choice of the heart doesn't derive its authority from reasons that have some sort of independent validity. Instead, the choice has, as William says, an inner law of motion. This decision, going forward, is not to be re-derived from things that ever exist in us apart from that decision itself.

4: Two kinds of reflection

In order to understand this other kind of decision, we need to understand how it relates to reflection. Sometimes it can seem like William wants to say that erotic love is incompatible with what he calls reflection. Plenty of things that William says, especially in his first letter, seem to imply that reflection itself is the issue. As we've seen, for example, William's purpose is in part to disabuse the 'reflective age' of its mistakes. He refers at one point to marriages that must be rescued from the "shipwreck" of reflection (EO II, 31). In *Remarks on Marriage* he writes of a young man who has lamentably "skipped a stage in the development of the soul and begun his life with reflection" (SLW, 120-121). Such a person, says William, would render himself unable to experience things with immediacy, and therefore unable to love: "He has lost the immediacy that carries a

person through life, the immediacy without which loving is impossible […]" (SLW, 121). As we've noted, in general, William's objections to A's dialectics don't just seem to be about some specific mistake he thinks A or the reflective age has made, but a principled objection to the application of critical thought to erotic love. William blames A's reflectiveness for what he sees as his depression (EO II, 24). He complains about the destructiveness of A's "prodigious mental machinery" (EO II, 31) and abundant use of the understanding, and is suspicious of the "disjunctive power of dialectic" that A has such a penchant for as something that "not only gives dispensation to everything but disintegrates and wipes it out." (EO II, 197). He expresses a general skepticism that the faculty of understanding can ever grasp the nature of erotic love. "As soon as the understanding wants to try to explain or think through love, the ludicrousness of it becomes apparent, something that is best expressed by saying that understanding becomes ludicrous." (SLW, 120). We've already seen in Chapter Two how William puts himself forward as "a married man" in contradistinction to the putting himself forward as someone who engages in doubt. It is, instead, his conviction that gives him something to offer the reader.

These statements and others might lead a reader to think that if William is interested in describing an alternative mode of decision, perhaps it is a mode that doesn't involve any reflection at all: no way in which we bring before ourselves our own thought and feelings to try to guide our life. Perhaps what William recommends is a sort of irrational leap into marriage. On a closer look, however, it is clear that this is not William's position.

Early in his first letter William writes (very obliquely) of two kinds of reflection.

He remarks that "If the fortunate individuals are also reflective and their reflection is directed to the eternal in love, it will be a strengthening of love; insofar as the reflection is on the temporal, it will be a breaking down of love." (EO II, 41). William also says in passing that "it is a mistake to assume that reflection only annihilates", when in fact "it rescues just as much" (EO II, 46). Such pronouncements are left obscure in *Either/Or*. In *Remarks on Marriage*, however, William goes out of his way to be clear that reflection, some sort of reflection, is central to his account of marital love. In fact, in *Remarks on Marriage* the paradox of marriage is reformulated around the need for reflection to form a resolution. Marriage is "a synthesis of falling in love and resolution" (SLW, 109). "Here, then, I pause at the crucial point: a resolution must be added to falling in love. But a resolution presupposes reflection, but reflection is immediacy's angel of death." (SLW, 157). William insists on the point:

> A resolution is always reflective; if this is disregarded, then language is confused and resolution is identified with an immediate impulse, and any statement about resolution is no more an advancement than a journey in which one drives all night but takes the wrong road and in the morning arrives back at the same place from which one departed. (SLW, 160).

To make a resolution—to carry in us a will that is our own—would mean nothing if it did not involve reflection. A resolution like the resolution to love, in marriage, is something that stands in us. It stands because we think that the resolution is right, good, beautiful; it

guides us to what we need in life. Just finding oneself to be in pursuit of a life of loving someone spontaneously, with no reflection, is, in fact, as we've seen, what William thinks *falling in love* is like. But we can just as easily fall out of it if it has not passed through reflection. He writes, "Marriage is based on a resolution, but a resolution is not the direct result of the immediacy of erotic love." (SLW, 102).

Reflection literally means "bent back". Reflection, as I understand William's use of the word, is the genus, referring in the most general way to an individual's will or attitude or action or awareness directed upon his own case. When I reflect in order to make a decision, I bring before myself what I contain: who I am, what my inclinations are, etc. When, in *Balance Between the Esthetic and Ethical,* William describes "choosing oneself" and writes that "The individual, then, becomes conscious as this specific individual with these capacities, these inclinations, these drives, these passions, influenced by this specific social milieu […]" (EO II, 251)—this description is a description of reflection. Erotic love, too, is something that we contain.

The key difference between the two modes of reflection lies in the role that decision is given in relation to reasons. In a deliberative decision, as we have seen, the will is supposed to be suspended in the reflection so that the determination of the will can instead follow from the reasons. Choosing oneself goes the opposite way. In choosing oneself, rather, we decide and the decision breathes life into our reason (i.e. our erotic love) or, in William's terms "rejuvenates" it (EO II, 9, 39, 112). If we are in first love we contain an incipient, naive "will to belong to each other forever*"* (SLW, 114). Reflection that will lead to action must relate to this incipient will in one or another way.

In a deliberative decision, a valid decision, as we saw, is found by first clearing away this incipient will—by, in William's terms, doubt. In choosing oneself, by contrast, the valid decision is based on nothing less than this incipient will, by "choosing" it

The question that has been guiding this chapter in general is: Where does the power in a resolution come from, in the individual? What gives it its grip on us? Our thinking naturally wants to reach for some sort of mediating reason that itself has validity that is independent of the act of decision. In other words we want a criterion. When we ask what sort of authority a decision to X has on us, we either name our reasons for deciding to X over other options, or perhaps we point to (i) or (ii) outlined above: we point to the good of having a decision, or we point out that the decision was made under the proper process or under good conditions for decision making. But according to William this is not the correct way to think about the authority that a decision has in marriage. Instead, what William offers is that we think of the decision as establishing an inner law of motion. (EO II, 61). The first love is the basis, in reflection, of the original decision to marry. The odd thing is that the erotic love, in turn, in the crisis of the reflection, depends on the decision for its reality. When erotic love depends on decision in this way, we call it marital love. This sense that the erotic love is both basis and, in turn, the outcome of the decision, is the sense in which marital love has a law of motion that first love lacked.[8] The lover, in the reflection with which he marries, is conscious of his erotic love only in and through taking responsibility for it, taking it up as a "task", as we will see in Chapter Five .

As William puts it in *Balance Between the Ethical and Esthetic*, "The choice itself

[8] For instances of William's language of an inner law of motion see EO II, 61, 94, 96, 98.

is crucial for the content of the personality: through the choice the personality submerges itself in that which is being chosen, and when it does not choose, it withers away in atrophy." (EO II, 163). William writes of the one who chooses himself: "He remains himself, exactly the same as he was before, down to the most insignificant feature, and yet he becomes another, for the choice penetrates everything and changes it." (EO II, 223). In a reflection in the mode of doubt, the will is determined by reasons that we merely have in ourselves or not, independently of the decision itself. In a reflection in the mode of resolution, it is, let us say, June's decision to love Alan that gives her access to the relevant relationship—including the emotional and esthetic elements—she bears to Alan and his person, even to Alan's beauty. Alan is beautiful to her only if devotion is in her. And in turn this devotion is constantly re-founded on his beauty and her erotic love for him. As we will see in the next chapter, the experiences she has gain meaning for her as parts of the history of her own resolution.

This marital love constitutes what William calls a "new immediacy". This is not like someone stubbornly saying: "I have decided and that's that". The person who has made a resolution, rather, can "immerse himself day after day in the original basis of the resolution" (SLW, 108). In a sense he is constantly re-making the decision out of the love and its pathos, its drive, its sense of satisfaction, the beauty beheld and appreciated in the other. But the erotic love only exists so long as he holds his decision in himself.

We said before that first love is different from other desires in that its desideratum includes the idea of its own development. This is one way in which love, unlike lust, "bears the stamp of eternity". Humoring William's use of the word 'lust' for a moment, let's say I lust after some flowers. I buy them, and now I have the flowers I lusted for. I

am either satisfied, or I was wrong about what would satisfy me. One of the purposes of *Either/Or,* I think, is to show us that the heart works differently. With my heart, rather, let us say, I yearn for flowers. This means, in part, that I already live in light of a life that incorporates my yearning for them into itself. My decision to buy them doesn't just set me on a path to acquire the thing that I wanted. My decision develops my yearning into devotion, a change in me that is then accomplished, advanced in the devotional act of acquiring them. I put them on my table and their radiance to me is the realization and flourishing of that yearning. The act itself is a crossing over into a more mature form of the desire that drove me to act. Whereas a deliberative decision has to regard reasons as input into a decision to do X, where X is not the reason itself; in a decision of the heart, on the other hand, we base our decision on something in us—namely our love—which is also the thing that we are bringing into existence.

Early in *Remarks,* William says that the critics of marriage always rally around the same issue: that there needs to be a "synthesis" of resolution and erotic love. William completely concedes that that is the difficult thing to conceive. Where he disagrees is in seeing this as an objection. "[T]he thing to do is to have the courage to say with Hamann: That is just the way it is." (SLW, 106). William's arguments, I think, amount to much more than that. And yet there is a certain way in which this is what it amounts to: a description of a phenomenon that slips the categories we always tend to fall into when imagining a rational mind. The ideal of a bare, unadulterated truth that is to be found in self-refection prior to a decision will never be the right fit for the phenomenon of erotic love.

5: The esthetic and the ethical

In William's terms, when we choose ourselves we pass from an "esthetic" to the "ethical" sphere of existence. As the terms are employed in *Either/Or,* the esthetic and the ethical describe two "life views", those (according to William) of A and William respectively. They are also stages of erotic love: first love is esthetic; marriage (or true marriage) is ethical. In marrying, an individual may enter the ethical sphere of life. [9]

[9] I have been operating, as I said I would in the introduction, on the understanding that William's three main writings are compatible with each other, and can form one coherent account of the esthetic and the ethical. There is, however, at least one significant conundrum faced by anyone who studies the texts together*:* how to understand what moves the individual to enter the ethical sphere of life.

The account given in *The Esthetic Validity of Marriage* is that the first love provides the impetus in a very natural way. First love wants to love forever. The lovers do pass through reflection, but not painfully. They are not cowering, not running away from anything. (See EO II, 146). In *The Esthetic Validity of Marriage* one can only become married if one is already in first love. In *Balance Between the Ethical and Esthetic,* on the other hand, the person who is ripe for ethical life is never spoken of as in love. Instead, the way one becomes ready for such a choice is by losing everything to despair. Despair is the state we are in when we discover that nothing can make us happy (nothing, that is, approached in the way the esthetic life-view approaches it—as though the substance of what makes us happy is some condition of life outside ourselves). The person who enters the ethical does so through his despair, through his religious repentance over his own despairing nature. William describes how such a person must first become an absolute self with no qualities, but with freedom. Only then may he plunge himself back into his concrete life, but in a way that is penetrated by his own will. In this way he takes responsibility for himself, even in the things that are out of his control.

A full discussion of despair and repentance would take us too far afield to be a part of this thesis and its focus. But we want to be able to reconcile the two descriptions of the transition from the esthetic to the ethical. The way I read the discrepancy is that as William sees it there are two paths to the ethical. There is more than one way to cross from one life-sphere to another.* William seems to think that most people are able to undertake the transfiguration from the esthetic to the ethical through love and marriage: by advancing from a first love through devotion to a more mature relationship to themselves and their own heart. This is the path that I am trying to understand in this thesis. There is, however, another way. *Balance's* approach to the ethical is, I take it, tailored to the special situation of A. William believes that A's erotic

I have held back from making use of this important language because although they occur throughout Judge William's writings, I believe that 'esthetic' and 'ethical' are terms that are meant to be only gradually understood as we study his texts. They are basic categories in Kierkegaard's writings, as in Kant so much pivots on the difference between '*a priori'* and '*a posteriori'* judgments. But as I understand it, the Kierkegaardian concepts have a very different role in the reader's education. It may be a good policy for a teacher of German philosophy to arm his students with a succinct formula for what, for example, *a priori* and *a posteriori* mean before he dispatches them into their first encounter with Kant's prose. I do not think that the same would be true of

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love is too reflective to ever have the innocence needed to be in first love (EO II, 53-54). A has been so warped by his estheticism that for him (and, one wonders, perhaps for Søren Kierkegaard), the door used by the many is closed, and they must instead enter the ethical another way. For the sake of A, *The Esthetic Validity of Marriage* is meant to prove that the ethical does not extinguish the esthetic in life, and to offer an example of a kind of choosing that is reflective without being a mode of doubt. *Balance Betweem the Ethical and Esthetic*, on the other hand, is meant to show A how he himself can make the transition, though despair. At one point, William is speaking of the first kind of transformation of first love by way of devotion to its "new immediacy". He then remarks of A, "This need, then, you do not have, the need to let love transfigure itself in a higher sphere, or, more correctly— for the first love does not have the need but does it spontaneously— you do have the need but refuse to satisfy it." (EO II, 56). On the one hand is the individual in first love. He, William proposes, "imagines no dangers at all, and yet [he] is drawn up into the ethical by the good intention." (EO II, 47). He comes to the ethical because it is essential to his first love that "the lovers will to belong to each other forever." (SLW 114). On the other hand we have A, who has tried to live for his own enjoyment and now despairs over life. The two ways of crossing from the esthetic to the ethical of course have a lot in common. Both accounts of the transition involve a kind of renunciation of the external, as we will see more in the next chapter.

*I am not the first to point out that there may be more than one way to transition from the esthetic to the ethical. Edward Mooney makes the case for the more general thesis that, in his words, "Kierkegaardian stage-shifts do not share a single structure." Edward Mooney, *Selves in Discord and Resolve: Kierkegaard's Moral-Religious Psychology from* Either/Or *to* Sickness Unto Death (New York: Routledge, 1996), 96.

Kierkegaard's 'esthetic' and 'ethical'. William does give some direct definitions of the terms (in fact they are among the few terms he defines), but these definitions raise as many questions as they answer if one has not prepared oneself to comprehend them. And it is no accident that these definitions are given in the second letter rather than the first. I believe that the first letter is there, in part, to give a rich illustration for the reader of the difference between the esthetic and the ethical in the relatively grounded and thickly textured subject of marriage, before she reads William's more high-altitude treatment of the two 'life-views' in *Balance Between the Esthetic and Ethical.* My method in this dissertation has been to follow Kierkegaard's order, and to work directly with the more concrete example Kierkegaard himself lays down—the example of marriage. Now, however, we are ready for the concepts of the ethical and esthetic.

In his letter *Balance Between the Esthetic and Ethical* William writes:

> But what does it mean to live esthetically, and what does it mean to live ethically? What is the esthetic in a person, and what is the ethical? To that I would respond: the esthetic in a person is that by which he spontaneously and immediately is what he is; the ethical is that by which he becomes what he becomes. The person who lives in and by and from and for the esthetic that is in him, that person lives esthetically. (EO II, 178).

William writes of the esthetic person,

> When an individual considers himself esthetically, he becomes conscious of this self as a complex concretion intrinsically qualified in many ways; but despite all the internal variety, all these together are nevertheless his nature, have equal right to emerge, equal right to demand satisfaction. His soul is like soil out of which grow all sorts of herbs, all with equal claim to flourish; his self consists of this multiplicity, and he has no self that is higher than this. (EO II, 225)

'Do I love Susan?' Faced with such a question, the person who lives esthetically may look inside himself for erotic love, which, he believes, is something simply there or not. But the truly married man, the ethical man, has come to a different kind of relationship to his heart and its contents. For him, there is no discoverable self-knowledge in that esthetic sense. Instead *he knows himself and sees what has value to him through and with his own rolling devotion and decision.* To know, at any moment, can only be coeval with his choosing. Erotic love, to an ethical person, essentially exists as "that by which he becomes what he becomes".

Because of this, the esthetic and the ethical person have different ways of carrying a decision. To an ethical person, a choice can take on a life of its own. This is not possible for a person who truly takes an esthetic approach to life. The esthetic person lives "by and from and for" the things that are in him immediately. A decision to marry, for an esthetic person, may still have validity that doesn't directly derive from reasons: there could be extrinsic good to leaving the decision settled, or he may have reason to believe—independently of the reasons now present to him for the decision—that this is

not the right time to make a better decision (that is, it could have validity in the mode of (i) or (ii) above). But what would it be for married person who was esthetic to really reflect on the good, to him, of his marriage? Insofar as he is esthetic, *what it is* to ask himself whether he loves his wife is, necessarily, tantamount to re-raising the decision in doubt. If he lives "by and from and for" that which is immediately in him, he regards his reasons as independent of his own decision. *Thus the decision has no more grip on him, in terms of validity, than that offered by what he considers his best reasoning independent of the prior will itself.* William writes of the reflective age: "It is an attempt to live every day as if this was the decisive day, an attempt to live as if one were up for examination every day." (EO II, 26).

In other words, to the esthetic individuality, there is the beauty of the beloved, and there is his love of her, and the validity of his resolution to share a life with her either rests upon these things because they do in fact exist, or it doesn't because they don't. For the person who lives ethically, the decision has a different way of being. When such a person brings before himself what he contains, he contains the resolution; he sees through the resolution in that moment, which is not a mere course of conduct that is derived from what motivates him, but is itself the mature object of his erotic love. This is why William claims that choice is truly the provenance of the ethical. "On the whole, to choose is an intrinsic and stringent term for the ethical. Wherever in the stricter sense there is a question of an Either/Or, one can always be sure that the ethical has something to do with it." (EO II, 166)

William writes,

> Every human being, no matter how slightly gifted he is, however subordinate his position in life may be, has a natural need to formulate a life-view, a conception of the meaning of life and of its purpose. The person who lives esthetically also does that, and the popular expression heard in all ages and from various stages is this: One must enjoy life. There are, of course, many variations of this, depending on differences in the conceptions of enjoyment, but all are agreed that we are to enjoy life. But the person who says that he wants to enjoy life *always posits a condition that either lies outside the individual or is within the individual in such a way that it is not there by virtue of the individual himself.* I beg you to keep rather fixed the phrases of this last sentence, for they have been carefully chosen. (EO II, 179-180, Judge William's emphasis).

Later he adds:

> The person who lives esthetically expects everything from the outside. This accounts for the sickly anxiety with which many people speak of the dreadfulness of not having found their place in the world. Who will deny the joy in having made a good catch in this respect, but such an anxiety always indicates that the individual expects everything from the place, nothing from himself. (EO II, 252).

An esthetic person may be trying to live a fulfilling life, but he thinks that this fulfillment comes from securing the things in life that simply are fulfilling to him—and to him the question of what is to be fulfilling is not a matter of his will. William's argument in *Balance Between the Esthetic and Ethical* is that nothing of real importance in life stands still like this. The idea of a choice depends on the idea that there is some thing in an individual—in the first letter he focuses on first love—that depends on his own decision for its continued grip on him. The esthetic person is someone who cannot see life this way. In the esthetic person, the things that matter matter "spontaneously and immediately", not because of anything we've decided.

In Chapter Two, I raised the question of who William is supposed to be. William presents himself as someone whose faith in the goodness of his own marriage is unshakeable. What we're supposed to wonder about with William, I suggested, is whether William knows himself, or whether he writes in order to go on in some sort of self-deception.

Now that we have become more clear about Williams views on doubt, decision, and the nature of an ethical life, we are in a position to understand better a very different sense in which William may know himself. William believes that we become a knowable thing to ourselves only through our own devotion.

> The phrase *γνῶθι σεαυτόν* [know yourself] is a stock phrase, and in it has been perceived the goal of all a person's striving. And this is

> entirely proper, but yet it is just as certain that it cannot be the goal if it is not also the beginning. The ethical individual knows himself, but this knowing is not simply contemplation, for then the individual comes to be defined according to his necessity. It is a collecting of oneself, which itself is an action, and this is why I have with aforethought used the expression "to choose oneself" instead of "to know oneself." When the individual knows himself, he is not finished; but this knowing is very productive, and from this knowing emerges the authentic individual. If I wanted to be clever, I could say here that the individual knows himself in a way similar to the way Adam knew Eve, as it says in the Old Testament. Through the individual's intercourse with himself the individual is made pregnant by himself and gives birth to himself." (EO II, 258-259).

We are a creature capable of asking ourselves what we contain, and determining the will on this basis. But what is it to know ourselves, if we are a lover? How do we go about that seeing? First, in the mode of doubt, you may *set aside the what we wish was the case*. William thinks that, alternatively, in devotion, you may *see things through the act of choosing them.*

Chapter Four: The Account of Resolution in *Remarks on Marriage*

The longest and most concentrated discussion of the formation of the decision to marry is found at the end of *Remarks on Marriage.* Perhaps one reason Kierkegaard wanted to reprise his pseudonym Judge William and write *Remarks* was that this specific part of the account had not received direct attention in the earlier work.[1] In this brief chapter, I will take a close look at this account, as a way of continuing and improving on the interpretation given in the previous chapter, which largely drew from *Either/Or*. Johanness Climacus observes that in *Remarks on Marriage* Judge William is "preoccupied with marriage from an entirely different angle from in *Either/Or*." (CUP, 287). Taking a close look at the argument from *Remarks* regarding reflection is edifying for this reason. It will give the reader a chance to review the argument around erotic love and decision against a new perspective, and with a new set of terms.

As I have pointed out, in *Remarks,* Judge William introduces the question of the

[1] It is my understanding that *Remarks on Marriage* never contradicts what William wrote in his letters. It is, in Climacus' assessment that the content of *Stages on Life's Way is* "The same as *Either/Or"* (CUP 286) (though he sees no detriment in this). It does, however, work with a different set of terms and emphasizes different themes, and the attentive reader will "hardly find a single phrase, a single turn of thought or language, as it was in *Either/Or*." (CUP 287). As I see it, the most striking are these differences in *Remarks on Marriage* are, first, that William's character, in his willfulness, is drawn out much more definitively, as we saw in Chapter Two. Second, there is a prolonged treatment of the female sex (corresponding to those in *In Vino Veritas* and Quidam's diary). Third, instead of a discussion of the qualitative differences between "first love" and "marital love", there is a narrower focus on the moment of resolution when the transition from one to the other is made.

resolution of marriage as the heart of his defense of marriage:

> Now the signal is given; all the objections [to marriage] that prowl around society like solitary shapes will, if they have any sense at all, concentrate on this point. I know it well, the battle is going to be here [….]
>
> The difficulty is this: erotic love or falling in love is altogether immediate; marriage is a resolution; yet falling in love must be taken up into marriage or into the resolution: to will to marry—that is, the most immediate of all immediacies must also be the freest resolution, that which is so inexplicable in its immediacy that it must be attributed to a deity must also come about by virtue of deliberation, and such exhaustive deliberation that from it a resolution results. Furthermore, the one must not follow the other; the resolution must not come slinking along behind but must occur simultaneously; both parts must be present in the moment of decision. If deliberation has not exhausted thought, then I make no resolution; I act either on inspiration or on the basis of a whim. (SLW, 102).

This passage is, of course, meant to be a highly paradoxical formulation—a formulation in which the parts aren't able to fit together on the surface of it—so we should be careful not to force too much sense on it.

In order to make a resolution, William says, we have got to have deliberation. A deliberation, we said, is a reflection in which one goes over one's reasons and arrives at a resolution through them. Because the will is supposed to follow from the reasons and not the other way around, we naturally think that if there is any prior plan or willfulness on the part of the lover, the deliberation will ideally proceed through what William calls doubt: the reflection recuses any prior determination of the will so that the will can instead be determined in the deliberation.

What the above passage says is that in the case of marriage this is problematic on the face of it. It seems that the very idea of a deliberative decision is that an outcome—the resolution—is derived from one's reasons and is in that sense mediated by them. Normally, in fact, this is how a decision bears authority: because there has been a deliberation, the decision bears the stamp and seal of one's reasons, of one's own rational process. But the idea of modern marriage is that we marry for love. And by nature erotic love cannot, for the lover, be derivative upon—mediated by—anything at all. The conclusion William draws from this, in a preliminary way, is that somehow although the resolution comes out of the deliberation, "the resolution must not come slinking along behind". So, puzzlingly, although there is said to be a deliberation and a decision, it appears that the decision does not obey the rule of deliberative decisions: the decision does not follow from the reasons. This is, somehow, not the relationship that the deliberation has to the decision. Somehow, rather, there is a kind of reflection in which the resolution can occur simultaneously with the deliberation.

The other perplexing thoughtthat William introduces in this passage is that, as he says, the deliberating with which we make the decision to marry must apparently be

"exhaustive". It must have "exhausted thought". The obvious way to read the idea of exhaustion is as having to do with how thorough we have been in considering our choice. To make a resolution to marry So and so we must have accounted for all the relevant reasons, have exhaustively thought through all the consequences of the decision and its alternatives that could bear on the resolution's validity. How else would it bear authority? But this too is problematic on the face of it. When it comes to choosing a mouthwash one can be (reasonably) exhaustive in gathering up the relevant considerations. But a marriage is not a mouthwash. For one thing, obviously, a marriage is simply far too complex for such thoroughness. For another, a human life continues to evolve too much for such thoroughness to even make sense. So, William asks, how is the decision going to bear weight with us? How will this life-long commitment continue to claim authority in reflection when new circumstances, new revelations, new responsibilities, and even new personal maturity keep entering into our life? William is essentially pointing out that a marriage, at any moment, is going to have to continue to have a grip on us in the sense that we think it is right and good. But then the only kind of deliberation that could be sufficient to such a resolution is one that foresees the future in ways that are rankly unrealistic.

The above problems, I take it, are part of what William has in mind when he writes the long passage on the formation of the resolution, roughly pages 157-164 in the Hong translation of *Stages on Life's Way*. There William begins by reiterating the first of the above two issues: "Here, then, I pause at the crucial point: a resolution must be added to falling in love. But a resolution presupposes reflection, but reflection is immediacy's angel of death." (SLW, 157).

I have written, in the previous chapter, of two kinds of reflection—reflection in the mode of doubt and reflection as resolution or choosing oneself. In the account in *Remarks* William uses what I take to be the same distinction, here put in terms of two 'directions' reflection can turn in making a resolution. On the one hand, the reflection with which we marry could "become a reflection over falling in love" (SLW, 152). In *Remarks* William imagines this primarily as a procedure in which we stand back and appraise the beloved, comparing her to some sort of ideal we hold and confirming (or disconfirming) that this is the person we should love, that this person is in fact beautiful.[2] But I take it that this appraisal could be of other aspects of the situation: one could appraise the institution of marriage, one could appraise what effect getting married is likely to have on oneself or one's family, and so on.

William, in the course of *Remarks,* points out that this critical reflection is not the way lovers behave. His next move is to wonder:

[2] In *Either/Or,* one issue William tries to address is why, if erotic love can be preserved, this so seldom seems to happen. Part of William's answer is that the interpretation of love taken up by both the romantic and the reflective ages fails to give a role to devotion in the development of love, ensuring that love will fail.

In *Remarks on Marriage* there is no talk of the romantic or reflective person. But William does consider the case of Goethe—or, as he says, Goethe as he appears in his autobiography *Aus meinem Leben*. *Aus meinem Leben* is partly taken up with Goethe's descriptions of the love affairs of his youth. Whenever Goethe fell in love, he stood back from the love to contemplate it, and made his great works of art out of what he saw in the contemplation. William's point about Goethe is that the great works of art of Goethe produces out of his contemplation of love are not actually about erotic love in its natural state. They are, rather, contemplations on what he experiences *as this is affected and shaped by the detachment of this contemplation.* For Goethe, a fleetingness that love has *due to the reflection* becomes a feature of what is described. In William's language, "The reflection out of which the resolution comes into existence in order to grasp the falling in love blunders; it becomes a reflection over falling in love." (SLW, 152).

> Since reflection does not dare to set foot in the holy place of love and on the consecrated ground of immediacy, what direction shall it then take until it arrives at the resolution? Reflection turns toward the relation between falling in love and actuality. For the lover, the most certain of all things is that he is in love, and no meddlesome thoughts, no stockbrokers run back and forth between falling in love and a so-called ideal— this is a forbidden road. [….] But to marry is to enter an actuality in relation to a given actuality; to marry involves an extraordinary concretion. This concretion is the task of reflection. (SLW, 159).

William here says that, as opposed to some sort of process of criticism, rather, to marry is, in his vatic phrase, "to enter an actuality in relation to a given actuality". I take the 'given actuality' to be the things that are given going into the marriage, meaning all the things that are already true before the decision and don't depend on it, in addition to what can be foreseen in them. To William, and to the question of marrying for love, the relevant given actuality is erotic love. For an esthetic person, *this given actuality will be the only actuality he sees.* He will try to base his decision on these things.

The second 'actuality'—the actuality we are to enter—is the marriage with its marital love and its resolution. William claims that when we marry, reflection doesn't turn upon the question of erotic love, wondering whether one is in love, or in love with the right person, etc. Instead, reflection turns toward the marrying and the change that that makes. One doesn't step back and wonder: is my present love with So and so what I

want for the rest of my life? One, rather, enters another actuality.

But how can I do that? How can I undertake the marriage *from the point of view of that marriage,* given that I haven't yet made the resolution? But William has already shown that what it is to be in first love is to exist in this emotional projection. When the person makes the decision to marry, he takes this inchoate willfulness and turns it into a resolution that takes on a life of its own. The difference is that, William says, he passes the love through an "ideal reflection".

> In a perfectly ideal reflection the resolution has ideally emptied actuality, and the conclusion of this ideal reflection, which is something more than the *summa summarum* and *enfin*, is precisely the resolution: the resolution is the ideality brought about through a perfectly ideal reflection, which is the action's acquired working capital. (SLW, 160).

This is thick with abstract terms (in general this part of *Remarks* is one of William's prolonged stratospheric balloon rides). But I think that in this we do get a succinct expression of the idea of reflection as resolution. This complex sentence is a description of a process of creation (or, William would prefer, of choosing). There is the material, there is an action, and then there is a product. The product, William says, is the resolution. The material is what William calls the 'given actuality': all the things that exist—including the first love—before the resolution. This actuality, in the creation of the resolution, is "emptied". When William speaks of "ideally emptying actuality" I take

this actuality to be the given actuality of first love. He is emptying that actuality to create the new actuality of marriage and marital love. In other words, as we've seen, this emptying has to happen for the decision to be a decision at all. It is emptied in a "perfectly ideal resolution". It is "emptied" not in the sense that it is disregarded, but in the sense that this thing is admitted, accounted for, in the decision and will not thereafter have the same validity (at least not in that form) in an ongoing way. It is like evidence that is admitted in a trial, but will not be allowed to be re-admitted in a retrial. The metaphorical language of "emptying" figures for us not that the esthetic elements are disregarded in the decision, but the fact that the esthetic basis we have for the marrying is not going to continue to be a condition on the legitimacy of the marriage (at least not in that form), as it would be for in esthetic person's decision. The same substance—erotic love—has passed from an esthetic to an ethical way of being.

We certainly have a basis that is the impetus for the decision to marry—the basis is the first love, the beauty of this beloved person. But this basis will not, thereafter, remain as an ongoing condition on the validity of the resolution that results from the decision. The marriage and marital love, which includes the ideal reflection, instead itself becomes the 'why' of marriage—with its own original, immediate intrinsic validity. The decision inhabits us not by being a standing representative of the reasons for the decision, but by redirecting the erotic energy onto itself.

The last really weird thing about the latter sentence in the above quotation is that the resolution figures both as a force that drives the reflection in its transformative work—"the resolution has ideally emptied actuality"—and the resolution is apparently also what is "brought about" as its "conclusion" of the reflection. This is not sloppiness

on William's part. It is a return to the idea that the resolution "doesn't come slinking along behind". It is a new expression for the idea from *Either/Or* that marital love has an inner law of motion. Here the metaphor is of the resolution as an ideality "which is the action's acquired working capital". The phrase "working capital" refers to capital, money, that is invested for the purpose of generating more money for the investor, that then, in turn, will be put to work. The erotic love in the form of first love was invested in the creation of the resolution, the turn to the ethical. William believes that when we've married, we above all win and gain the grounds we had for the decision: that is, we gain and secure something that acts like working capital: the devotion that runs ahead to be the basis for the next act of resolution.

William now depicts the young man in first love as living in a delight that quickens him. His formation of his resolution is full of easy energy (SLW, 161). It is the nature of first love to be oriented to eternity in the love, and to "wish to belong to each other …." The young man is depicted by William "survey[ing] that ideal image of actuality that appears to him" (SLW, 161). Again I take this to be the second actuality—the actuality of the anticipated marriage, which is penetrated by his resolution. In other words, the young man comes not to live in light of the things that are in him, but the things that will be in him by virtue of his marrying. He is entering the ethical. In *Balance Between the Esthetic and Ethical* William writes, "The self the [ethical] individual knows is simultaneously the actual self and the ideal self, which the individual has outside himself as the image in whose likeness he is to form himself, and which on the other hand he has within himself, since it is he himself. (EO II, 259). This brings to him an indescribable delight. William then returns to the idea that the decision to marry has got

to be “exhaustive":

> Precisely because this is how it is with the resolution or the one making the resolution, the reflection becomes ideal, and one quickly takes a wonderful shortcut. And why should one not go by a shortcut when it is certain that it takes one faster to the goal, faster than any other, but also unerringly, more unerringly than any other? It has been correctly observed that reflection cannot be exhausted, that it is infinite. Quite right— it can be exhausted in reflection no more than someone, be he ever so hungry, can eat his own stomach, and thus one dares to look upon anyone who says he has done this, be he a systematic hero or a newsboy, as a Münchhausen. On the other hand, reflection is discharged into faith, which is precisely the anticipation of the ideal infinity as resolution. Thus through the purely ideally exhausted reflection the resolution has gained a new immediacy that corresponds exactly to the immediacy of falling in love. (SLW, 161-62).

When William says here that “the reflection becomes ideal” he means nothing less than that the whole picture of *the choosing of erotic love leading erotic love itself to exist and thrive* becomes the new, more definite, possibility projected in the erotic love. William writes not just of reflection, but of an “ideal reflection”. A reflection, we said, is a case when an individual brings before himself the contents of his own mind and heart. An

"ideal reflection" I take to be the individual's *idea of a possible act of reflection* that itself can be taken up and considered in a reflection. When William says that the "reflection becomes ideal", what he means is that the reflection—the work on the task of loving—itself comes to figure as part of the picture we see of the love's possibility. In this way, the ideal reflection, in William's phrase, "penetrates" the actuality (SLW, 147, 160, 161, also EO II, 223). This is important because this is the sense in which the hope becomes secured against adversity. This is the sense in which, unlike someone in first love, the marital love is always sufficient to its goal. It goes to its goal "unerringly". The real difference between first love and marital love is here in this development of an inner object for the love. This will be the subject of Chapter Five.

Chapter Five: Married Love: William and his Wife at Tea

In the end one loves one's desire and not what is desired.

-Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*[1]

Love is active. It flows through humans, but it is larger than human life. It is through love that humans, and the rest of living nature, acquire form. Love tends toward higher organization and form, but humans do not acquire form by passively being affected by love. What it is for love to run through a person is that he himself becomes a locus of activity.

-Jonathan Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature*[2]

1: A vignette of married love

Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way* begins with a section titled *In Vino Veritas* consisting of the pseudonym William Afham's recollection of a banquet at which each of the revelers (all except the narrator himself) give a speech on the nature of erotic love. (Constantin Constantius, the host of the banquet, specifies that the speeches should be about "erotic love, or the relation between man and woman…" (SLW, 30), making the event almost, but not quite, in the mode of Plato's *Symposium*). The men have what Kierkegaard calls esthetic life views. Though there are differences between their speeches, they are all persons for whom it is an article of faith that the highest task in life

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil,* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 175.

[2] Jonathan Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature* (New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 1990) 219.

is enjoyment. They come to their subject with a will to court intensity and "the interesting", and a fear of boredom. If they mention marriage they do not recommend it.

As with the *Symposium, In Vino Veritas* ends early the next morning. But then, in a sort of coda, Afham relates how after the feast he and the other guests go out riding in the countryside. There they happen upon a secluded arbor in which they can spy a married couple. This turns out to be Judge William and his wife.[3] What follows is the only vignette of married life in Kierkegaard's texts: Afham's report of what passes between the pair as they sit down to a cup of tea in the early morning, unaware that they are being watched. William's wife energetically and with "childlike zeal" prepares the tea, though with such skill that it appears she must do so every day. He drinks it with pleasure. Then, as he smokes a cigar, she speaks to him of how she worries that he could have been "much greater in the world" if he had not married her. Apparently this is a conversation that they have had before. He teases her and doesn't engage with the idea, at least not outwardly. Then they disappear arm in arm down a wooded path (SLW, 84).

What is a reader of *Stages on Life's Way* supposed to see in this connubial scene? Why is it here? One reason that the tea scene is recounted, it appears, is to provide a segue into the second section of the book. (Victor Eremita steals William's manuscript *Reflections on Marriage* from the Judge's study once the pair are out of sight). But the tea scene, as I read it, both in its content and its mode of presentation, is also meant to represent an image of an ethical way of being, specifically as it is manifested in marital love. Or, to be more exact, situated between the esthetic and ethical sections of *Stages,*

[3] Something that is left mysterious in this account (and perhaps it is just a mistake) is how it is that Victor Eremita, the editor of *Either/Or,* recognizes that it is Judge William in the arbor. In *Either/Or* Victor claims not to know him or anything about him that would identify him.

the tea scene allows an onlooker (or a reader) to give one or another interpretation to it, and give one or another appraisal of the behavior observed in it, from either an esthetic or an ethical point of view. Essentially, with the quotidian morning tea time in the arbor we have something an esthete would point to as an example of precisely what is so unbearable in married life—habit, triviality, the threat of regret. Yet in the same scene we have what an ethical person might point to as an example of what life is worth living for. The latter is a bit more difficult to appreciate.

In the last chapter we explored the phenomenon of decision. A decision, in a strong sense, is not just a determination of the will to do something. Rather, we make a decision when we carry the determination in us, as our will, after we have made it. More than this, to make what William calls a choice is for a determination of the will to itself take on a life of its own, to us, in our emotional life. To say "I do" and become married is for the resolution itself to come to be one's project. Furthermore, one carries the decision in such a way that its validity is not thereafter to be derived directly from the grounds—i.e. the first love in its state of natural necessity—that led one to form it. In fact, when one marries, one doesn't just base one's decision on one's erotic love. One transfers the erotic energy with which one comes to the decision onto the resulting resolution itself. This is the thread on which, on my understanding, William's theory of married life is strung.

This strong sense of decision is something that separates the ethical from the esthetic. When an esthetic person makes, and carries, a decision, the reasons he had (or thought we had) for making the decision are what give the decision validity. The unanticipated difficulties of married life must be experienced by the esthete as bearing on

the wisdom of his choice. (Which is part of why savvy esthetes avoid commitment, as A advises)[4]. With an ethical choice, by contrast, one, as it were, kicks away the ladder (to decide is literally "to cut off"), and adds an absolutely valuable original new category to the center of one's experience of the world: the marriage and marital love. When a man marries, "The ethical teaches him that the relationship is the absolute". (EO II, 304). In William's phrase, when a man is married, there is, for him, "marriage's own "why"" (EO II, 62). The ethical individual's act of choosing supplants the natural necessity and contingency of falling in love. This marriage, furthermore, is now characterized by a task: the assimilation of life's details and difficulties into the story of the marriage's (and the family's) persistence through time.

This ethical choice is transformative. A boundary is passed. But, to be clear, the upshot here is not that the decision to marry is made once and that's that, as though the bond we forge were now indissoluble independently *of our feelings* about it. Quite the contrary: the way we feel about the bond has everything to do with its validity to us, at every stage of the relationship. Rather, William describes the married state as one of continually choosing, as a kind of activity, and as an inherently reflective way of living (SLW, 108). One is transformed, rather, in the sense that, going forward, the basis of one's choice is now the new emotional fact of the marriage and married love. The difference it makes to marry, rather than to be in first love, is that a rolling devotion, with its "inward law of motion", has come on the scene. When John marries on Saturday, his inchoate first love is the natural basis of his choice to commit to loving this person forever. On Sunday, and every day thereafter, John chooses anew; but not like the

[4] EO I, 292-298.

esthete, whose new reflection will in principle (to be valid) abrogate and stand away from any past and up-to-now volition on the matter. Rather, if John is ethical, on Sunday the basis of his choice is his own devotion, tested now again, his emotional life insofar as it has been penetrated and reinterpreted by his resolution to love. This, I take it, is Kierkegaard's central illustration of what an ethical life is: a life in which what is highest to us exists by virtue of our own action.

In this chapter, I am going to turn to the latter part of this development, to marital love and what William calls "possession", after—it may be long after—the initial transformation has been made. In particular I am going to focus on the phenomenon that in marital love one is continually choosing one's love, and that marriage is some sort of reflective life. This needs to be brought down to earth. William writes that the married man is constantly rejuvenating his first love in "action". Early in his first letter he writes that "This rejuvenation of our first love is not just a sad looking back or a poetic recollecting of past experience, whereby one is finally enmeshed— all that kind of thing is exhausting— it is an action." (EO II, 10). Now we need to understand: how are we to picture this action? How is it performed? Before this thesis is concluded we need to understand better the ways in which a choice to be married is part of the day to day lives of married people. It is easy enough to agree that a choice is prominent, for example, in the moment that one person proposes marriage to another. It is, moreover, clear how a wedding ceremony brings an act of deciding on a path in life into focus for the couple, concentrated in a public "I do". But William describes the spouses as *continually choosing*, for the rest of their days. Are we, then, to imagine the married pair over and

over engaging in an activity that, to them, is psychologically or structurally akin to the action of the proposal or the vow? That sounds naïve even for William. Aren't most marriages, rather, mired in routine and the hum drum familiarity that takes the place of self-reflection, consciousness, and choice?

The latter, I take it, is more or less what A, or any esthete, would say, surveying the scene in the arbor. In married life one has, let us say, tea each morning in the same place with the same person out of the same cups at the same table. How can this possibly be something we could characterize by choosing and reflection? Rather, isn't it habit? Doesn't the settlement and habit of a (supposedly) good marriage, rather, take the place of the active use of the mind? William's wife asks him to consider that he could have chosen a different path in life. His response is apparently to drown her out by humming.

On my reading, *The Esthetic Validity of Marriage* from about pages 96-144 is where we can find William's extended response to this (in his view) misconception about habit. And it is where we can find his attempt to get at the sense in which marital love involves a kind of reflection. This chapter is about how a kind of choosing is undertaken in the ordinary things that we do, like sitting down to tea. As I understand it, similar to the discussion of first love in Chapter One, we come to understand marital love in William's account by understanding the different way in which pathos works in married life in relation to time and possibility, in this case especially as it relates to repeated events such as tea time. William primarily describes the way in which marital love has a mode of reflection as its ability, unlike first love, to, in his words, "have a history". This is the central concept I will focus on.

2: The task

The first step in understanding this part of the argument is to appreciate the sense in which William thinks that as erotic love develops, the love itself becomes a "task" to us. William writes in *Balance Between the Esthetic and the Ethical*, "[T]he person who lives esthetically sees only possibilities everywhere; for him these make up the content of future time, whereas the person who lives ethically sees tasks everywhere. (EO II, 251). In my view, this aspect of the account is easier to understand than the idea of "having a history" itself, so I will begin here.

Perhaps it is best to approach this by way of analogy. It is said in parenting that you shouldn't praise talent, you should praise persistence. If little Ethan takes up a crayon and effortlessly draws a lifelike rendition of a T. Rex on his first try, the parenting books say you should keep your delighted mouth shut. It is when Ethan works hard at learning to draw T. Rexes that you are to open up with encouragement and say expressively, "You have worked hard on that! I'm so proud of you." The wisdom of this is clear enough. Whether or not Ethan can draw great T. Rexes is unimportant. What is important is the sort of person you are shaping him to be. If you teach him, through your approval, to place value on virtuosity and what he has been given by nature, you teach him to place value on something that is out of his hands. By responding instead to his effort, in these early, malleable years, you can move the needle of the compass over to work itself, so that this shines for him. At its best, the idea here isn't just to teach him how to handle himself practically (teaching him that if he wants great T. Rexes he's got to practice). It is a more radical education: to make him a life-long lover of learning, persistence and

growth.

It is helpful to both compare and contrast this to the transformation at the heart of William's account of marriage. Marital love is qualitatively different from first love in that, through the marriage, William believes, one moves the needle over from something spontaneous to a kind of work: one's own perseverance in one's marriage, so that one's own intentional activity lights up for us and is taken to be intrinsically important and beautiful by us. The married person begins what he calls "the work of willing to hold fast to this love." (EO II, 47)[5]. Furthermore this work is essential to one's experience of marital love. When William's wife is preparing and serving tea, and when William is enjoying it, they are engaging in the project of perseverance in their marriage that is itself the thing that shines for them in life. William's wife is in some sense doing a practical task: she wants her home to function, so she pours the tea. But like a well-brought up child, for her the work itself constitutes the highest.

This sense that the true joy is the task is something that was not yet present in first love. First love is happy, and projects the possibility of a happy love life from itself. Its intensity comes from the thought: this love might be possible with this person. Like "faith that in the power of the promise feels itself capable of moving mountains and goes around performing miracles" (EO II, 94), the first love is potent because it believes in itself. But first love is still something esthetic. It is an erotic love that came upon the lover as a response, a given. William believes that the human heart is constituted in such a way that one can "choose oneself", and that choosing oneself moves what lights up the

[5] Compare a very similar formulation from *Reflections on Marriage*: "What the resolution wants now is first of all to hold fast to love". SLW, 163.

person's heart over from any sort of mere esthetic response that occasioned the erotic love, and on to the effort we put into the shared life of devotion that comes to constitute the continued love. As William puts it, "[T]he resolution is the true form of love" (SLW, 117).

3: Having a history

This sense that "the resolution is the true form of love" is intimately related, in William's mind, with the idea that first love is meant to gain a history, that in his words, "[I]t is the essential nature of first love to become historical […]" (EO II, 47).

William imagines that A, for his part, would think that it is ridiculous for William to make 'having a history' the centerpiece of his conception of marital love. To A, marriage is the last thing in the world that should be said to have a *history*. The word history implies that something has happened. But to A, nothing ever happens in married life. Nothing happens, that is, except the things that happen over and over. A, observing William and his wife at morning tea, might point to them as a fine specimen of just such a rule. Tea can be a symbol of domestic ritual. One takes one's tea the same way every time—one prepares one's tea to taste. The true tea drinker drinks it in the same spot every day (it occurs to me as I write this that I drink my tea pushed back from the dining room table after breakfast every day. I try, hopelessly, to 'take a moment', as my two- and five-year-old boys scream with the new morning). If A were to observe the tea time William and his wife are enjoying—this, let's imagine, 2037th time that these two sit down to

their routine—he would say, rather, that history is exactly what has ended for these two people. He might say that the tea time is a good illustration of "… this dreadful monotony, the everlasting *Einerlei* [sameness] in the alarming still life of marital domesticity" (EO II, 125)[6]; thus a good illustration of what he calls (or what William imagines him calling) "the complete lack of events" in married life (EO II, 143). We can imagine A making a joke like: the history of this couple can be summed up in the following way: They sat down to tea. Merriam Webster's Dictionary defines "history" as "A chronological record of significance events often including an explanation of their causes". This definition seems in line with A's idea of what a history ought to be. Something has a history when there is a story to tell of the persistence of that thing through change. William says very little about anything changing in his marriage.

As we saw with the phrase "first love", For William, I take it, the phrase "having a history" has a different but related resonance to it. It is the difference between having a history in the sense that there is a story to tell about how things came to be, and having a history in the more active sense that one guides one's behavior based in part on one's understanding of one's past. Not so that one can try to recapture it, but so that one can live up to it and fulfill it.

When William speaks of having a history, his use of the phrase is actually not unlike our contemporary expression wherein we say that two people "have a history". In the contemporary expression, as I understand it, one has a history with So and so insofar as there have been emotionally significant events in one's relationship with that person, such that those past events profoundly shape one's experience, attitude, and actions with

[6] See also EO II, 118

relation to them in the present. To say that two people have a history is not necessarily to say that there is some list of significant changes in their relationship. To say that two people have a history is, rather, to say that they come to a new experience in a way that is "loaded" with the past. Sometimes the concept is used to make a lament. John and Danielle, let us say, have chemistry. They are each other's type. But *in addition to these things,* they may also have a history, and this history may determine the way that they can and cannot be with each other. It may even be that if John and Danielle had met at a different time in their lives, or it things "had gone differently", then they could have had a beautiful love, but as it happens now they have a history, and the love and trust can't just start over.

Sharing significant events that shape one's interactions with a person is not all there is to having a history in this sense. Two soldiers who belong to the same platoon, or two members of a cult will, as I understand it, have a history. On the other hand two people that are held hostage because they both happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time may share a powerful bond because of the experience but I don't think that we would say that they necessarily have a history. Having a history means that things have happened that involve the intentions of the two people toward each other. Having a history implies that there has been something undertaken between them.[7]

Let's imagine that one day two people enjoy some tea together. As it turns out,

[7] In the contemporary phrase, we speak of "having a history" as having to do with one's relationship to another person as more or less one monolithic whole. Because of one's history with So and so one trust them, or one doesn't trust them. One feels comfortable with them or one doesn't feel comfortable with them, etc. One of the more unique and interesting aspects of William's account, as I read it, is that to him having a history can have to do with specific acts, those that are part of the rituals of the relationship.

they love each other's company. This is a mutually felt, natural, free response to each other. The next day, let us say, they have tea again. They have an equally wonderful time! The tea is poured and—lo and behold, they enjoy tea together again. William, as I understand it, would say that there is as yet no history in this description. In fact, even if these two were to have tea together over and over for the rest of their lives, they would not necessarily rise to the level of having a history. The same people reacting in the same way to the same circumstances over and over is not a history. The pair has a history only when the events have an internal, intentional relationship to each other for them. There must be a sentimentality that says: this is who we are and what we do because we've always done it, and that sentimentality has got to be part of what gives the act its esthetic element and interest. Such is the pathos of marriage. Or, to put it more exactly, William thinks that marrying makes the pathos work in this different way.

Let's now instead imagine a pair who undergo a transformation from first love to marital love as William describes it. Two people have, let us say, their 'first tea' (and in Kierkegaard's Copenhagen this would be before the marriage: they are likely to have had their first tea time as a part of their courtship). This tea time occurs in the first flash of love. At the first tea time, the two individuals each encounter beauty, and they experience erotic longing, a sort of call. This yearning, as we have said, is not a desire with a desideratum in the normal way. It aches to develop and grow. The beauty that they encounter calls each of them to in some sense live into it: to inhabit a life that fulfills that feeling of wonder and awakening. They do this in part by appropriating the experience of the tea time as part of their love's inner history. This appropriation happens not by recollecting the early days from time to time, but by having tea each day. One's 2037th

time having tea is an expression of the task of living up to that first erotic experience, a task that was in some sense contained in that first experience. The 2037th time is connected to the first time, not in the sense that one reminisces on or revives those good, passionate early times, but in the sense that the lifetime of love is the slow fulfillment of the idea—In William's words the whole—that that first tea time contained. And so long as one continues to live up to it, William claims, the pathos of the first love will remain undimmed. Far from trapping them, the marriage "frees [them] from stagnating in habit by maintaining a fresh current." (EO II, 67), though in a way that has nothing to do with novelty.

In this context, it s useful now to flag a disanalogy between marital love and the case of Ethan and his T. Rexes I sketched above. In the case of the T. Rex, we said, the boy can learn to love hard work. It may be perfectly compatible with this, however, that nonetheless a good T. Rex is a good T. Rex, however much or little effort was put into it. Ethan can learn to control his crayon. Ethan can learn what features T. Rexes have. But part of what makes these things count as *working on T. Rexes*, and thus what makes the work feel satisfying, is that they, in principle, lead Ethan closer to achieving an independent standard of success: the persuasive representation of a T. Rex. Ethan cannot really be said to be working on his T.Rex drawing (in the way the good parent wishes to foster) unless he is holding that independent standard of success before him.

In marriage, we can now see, the situation is structured somewhat differently. What shapes the work of marriage is not some independent standard of success. Instead, what it means to be in that marriage and maintain it is shaped by its history: by the things

that the couple has done, by the material facts of their life together. The difference it makes to be married is that the things that are merely the concrete facts, acts, and events of one's existence come to be things that one is faithful to through time, for love. First love, we said, is a yearning to grow into a shared life of loving. But what exactly that life looks like—where the couple will live, how many children they will have, the things that they will do together, are not yet determined. As the marital love develops, and gains a history, the love itself becomes cast into to the particular people, places and things that the couple builds as their life. William writes,

> Marital love manifests itself as historical by being a process of assimilation; it tries its hand at what is experienced and refers what it has experienced to itself. Consequently, it is not an uninterested witness to what happens but is essentially participative— in short, it experiences its own development. (EO II, 97).

As the couple comes to settle into their life, the traditions that are established, like tea time in the garden, become the fleshly realization of the erotic love itself, in the sense that staying true to that love is the same as staying true to those traditions. William's marriage, in its concretion (tea not coffee, conversation not lawn bowling), is created—or, William would prefer, chosen—by his wife's act of preparing the tea service.

Previously we saw that William discusses various things that others might consider a reason to get married or stay in a marriage: one wants children, character, or a home. William, as we saw, says that it is a mistake to make these things the 'why' of

marriage. Marriage is not entered into from some sort of calculation. This is part of the sense in which the decision is ethical, as I have described. "Nothing else ever belongs to marriage but marriage's own why" (EO II, 63). Rather, if we don't 'disorder' our relationship to them, the goods of marriage such as character, children, having a home gain their beauty and value to us through the devotional act of marrying. With the concept of having a history and appropriating experiences to the marital love, I take it, William is expanding on this idea.

As we saw in Chapter One, first love is so powerful because there is a sort of interanimation between the present and a possibility we see. In this sense, first love "contains the whole", in William's phrase. The first love is "abstract" in the sense that there is no definite understanding of what it wants. It sees, through this love, the possibility of a happy life, but not necessarily a particular possibility. There is as yet no role for rationality—for our ability to mediate our own response to the world through rules and concepts—on things that we think are true or things that we value. Or, to be more exact, there is no role for rationality except that our love is the unfathomable and abstract basis for our drive to build a life with someone.

But the marriage, over time, becomes concrete, and in a way more recognizably rational.

> As a result of this exploration, I can stress here that marriage, in order to be esthetic and religious, must have no finite "why," but this was precisely the esthetic in the first love, and thus here again marriage stands *au niveau* [on a level] with first love. And this is the

> esthetic in marriage—that it hides in itself a multiplicity of "whys" that life discloses in all its blessedness. (EO II, 88).

When a "why" is "disclosed" to us, marriage acquires what looks more like a rational structure. Marital love continues to be an emotion, something with immediacy, but it is, as it were, filled out with a sense of "why"—I am married for my particular children, my character, my home. The first love is the impetus for the marriage. Twenty years in, what makes the marriage make sense is not the way that the couple felt in their early years. It is the life that they built: their character, their children, their home.[8]

In one of the richest summarizing passages of *The Esthetic Validity of Marriage,* William writes,

> The question […] is this: Can this love be actualized? After having conceded everything up to this point, you perhaps will say: Well, it is just as difficult to actualize marriage as to actualize first love. To that I must respond: No, for in marriage there is a law of motion. First love remains an unreal *an-sich* that never acquires inner substance because it moves only in an external medium. In the

[8] One could compare William's vision of the 'why' of marriage to the way wars are justified. The reasons men give for initiating a war never end up being sufficient to the sacrifices that need to be made in it as it progresses. But each offensive, each call for more sacrifices, becomes justified, rather, by the need to give meaning to the war's casualties—the war has to be won so that those who fell "shall not die in vain". This is a sad and absurd rule of mass violence. More happily, in erotic love, William believes that things move along with a structurally similar inner law of appropriation.

> ethical and religious intention, marital love has the possibility of an inner history and is as different from first love as the historical is from the unhistorical. This love is strong, stronger than the whole world, but the moment it doubts it is annihilated; it is like a sleepwalker who is able to walk the most dangerous places with complete security but plunges down when someone calls his name. Marital love is armed, for in the intention not only is attentiveness directed to the surrounding world but the will is directed toward itself, toward the inner world. (EO II, 94).

Now that we are approaching the end of this thesis, we have the tools to interpret most of this passage. When William writes of the "difficulty of actualizing first love" he is referring, first, to a premise that he and A agree on: the fact that falling in love is not something that one brings about through one's own voluntary action. In contrast to this, the contested point is whether marriage, and marital love, is the same way: whether that too must be something spontaneous and out of one's hands, whether it is just as difficult to "actualize". William's argument, of course, is aimed at showing that it is not spontaneous, that not only can marital love come about through one's own intentional effort, it can only come about that way. In fact overt intention is the essential advent in married life.

William also claims in this passage that unlike first love, marital love enjoys a sort of security. It is a security that comes from "the intention", and from having a history. One of Afham's remarks when he narrates the scene in which the revelers first

spy William and his wife in the arbor is that he, Afham, can immediately tell that they are married because of the unmistakable air of security that they evince (EO II, 82-83). Now that we have got the basics of William's view of having a history, we can see some of what that security consists in. The temptation is to think that the 'security' in married love is supposed to somehow come directly from the fact that the lovers have girded themselves with a firm resolve. But this is facile. If two fathers may or may come to the PTA meeting, the one who has made (not just claimed to make, but actually made) a resolution to do so is presumably more likely to show up. But nothing like this is necessarily to be taken for granted when it comes to erotic love. I can will to will to will to love someone, squeeze my eyelids shut and internally shout at myself that I promise to love forever. I can proclaim it to all the world. What will it avail me? If the question is: "How can love last?" and William's answer is: "Because the married man has resolved that it should", or "Because in a marriage one makes it one's duty" the argument would be feeble. If this, or anything like it, were what William had to say, he wouldn't be worth reading. It certainly wouldn't convince A, because the viability of such a commitment to love is exactly what A distrusts. To understand how the resolution makes the married people secure in their love, rather, you've got to understand how the resolution becomes something with a life of its own. We begin to see the security of love in the phenomenon of having a history.

4: Possession

The orators of *In Vino Veritas* drink wine. William and his wife drink tea. Wine can of course be imbibed in many moods and ways—it has its place in some religious rituals, for example—but one of the ways is the way that the revelers drink it in *In Vino Veritas.* Here, far from ceremony, the wine attends something special and out of the ordinary. The banqueters, in fact, have an obscure obsession with the idea that the banquet should never be repeated (SLW, 25, 28). In one way that wine can be enjoyed, one way conversation over wine can work, wine enables the impromptu, the candid, and free. The motto of the banquet is '*in vino veritas'*. Afham remarks that the idea of speeches made *in vino* is that "wine is the defense for truth and truth is the defense for wine." (SLW, 26). Wine, at least in theory, allows things that are already there in us to escape from our brains and bodies. We drink it to lose our inhibitions. Tea is not like this. Wine enables us to access what is already in us. Tea engenders a consciousness, and a contentedness, but it is not a contentedness we already have in us. It is, rather, a contentedness with what we already have. Afham reports that when William's wife hands him the cup of tea she remarks, "Hurry now, dear, and drink your tea while it is hot; the morning air is still somewhat cool, and the least thing I can do for you is to be a little solicitous." When the judge replies "The least?", she responds: "Well, or the most, or the only thing." (SLW, 84). The latter is a curious remark, but I take it that it is meant to resonate with what it can feel like to have a cup of tea. The transcendental experience engendered by a cup of tea at its best—the feeling that something small nonetheless has the whole of what is necessary in life in it—is said to be why tea has such a prominent place in some cultures. The

Japanese tea ceremony, and 'teaism', is supposed to be about accepting what we have, and seeing what is highest in the low and ordinary. With the contrast between the simplicity of the scene and the complexity of, in William's wife's words, "becoming greater in the world", my impression is that Kierkegaard had similar thoughts in mind. Wine and tea are emblems for the esthetic and the ethical approaches to one's own passions. What wine is good for is fairly obvious and well appreciated. What tea is good for is something that it is possible to not see at all. I take it that with the transition from *In Vino Veritas* to *Remarks on Marriage,* a reader is given an opportunity to see that the esthete's interpretation of the significance of the historical in marriage is due to a narrow-mindedness when it comes to the nature of and variety of rich esthetic experiences.

In *The Esthetic Validity of Marriage,* one thesis that Judge William insists on is that "possession" is a "constant acquiring". William approaches this thesis by first stating that 'the esthetic' "consists in the acquired" (EO II, 94). With the latter William is actually saying something that he thinks A agrees with, though A doesn't yet understand its full significance. In writing that the esthetic "consists in the acquired" I take it that he means by "the esthetic" what, in an experience, makes that experience able to be interesting, involving, evocative, moving to a person.[9] When he says that the esthetic consists in the acquired, William is pointing out that for creatures like us, our enjoyment and engagement is not occasioned by things that simply fall in our lap and are already there for our mere consumption. Rather, our excitement must be accompanied by the

[9] I take it that this claim that the esthetic consists in the acquired is meant to be different from (though related to) the more technical distinction William draws between the esthetic and the ethical we explored in Chapter Three. There we saw William, in *Balance Between the Esthetic and Ethical,* writing that "the esthetic in a person is that by which he spontaneously and immediately is what he is; the ethical is that by which he becomes what he becomes." (EO II, 180).

fight to lay claim to something that we seek. In this case what is 'esthetic' cuts across esthetic and ethical ways of existing. We already saw something like this in the role of struggle in the romantic age—what William calls the romantic knight's "incredible need for incredible deeds". (EO II, 118).

Because of the way A interprets the idea that the esthetic consists in the acquired, A believes that when we enter a marriage and begin to settle into a life that has a pattern to it, habits and haunts and grooves to it, like any marriage must, the esthetic diminishes. One's wife, and all these things that we do with her, all become a sure bet, and with a sure bet "acquiring" ceases. With the conquest over, the esthetic is over. This, I take it, is akin to the belief that when it comes to love, people only want what they don't have yet. What makes the passion possible is 'the chase'. Johannes the Seducer writes that "a relationship is over as soon as one has enjoyed the ultimate." (EO I, 368). Once he has made a conquest of Cordelia, he writes, "Now all resistance is impossible. And love is beautiful only so long as resistance is present; as soon as it ceases, love is weakness and habit." (EO I, 445). In the words of Denise De Rougemont, whose work owes much to Kierkegaard's *Either/Or,* "[Iseult] is the woman-from-whom-one-is-parted: to possess her is to lose her."[10]

William thinks that one way to understand the esthetic in marriage is to realize that for the truly married person, possession is not the end of conquest, but the conquest, for the spouse, is for the possession through time. William writes that "To be specific, a possessing is not a spiritually dead and invalid *Schein* [appearance], even though with

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[10] Denis De Rougemont, *Love in the Western World,* trans. Montgomery Belgion (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 284.

legal status, but a constant acquiring." (EO II 132). Furthermore, William insists that *this is the true form that the esthetic is meant to have*, and that one can even see this in men like A and the Seducer. Indeed, William claims that married life is the "summit of the esthetic" (EO II, 173), that marriage "is the poetic" (EO II, 96).

To William, what it is to experience the esthetic in marriage—the emotion, the pathos, is to consider one's acts under the aspect of perseverance through time forever in each moment.

> A married man is faithful for fifteen years, and yet during these fifteen years he has had possession; therefore in this long succession he has continually acquired the faithfulness he possessed, since marital love has in itself the first love and thereby the faithfulness of the first love. But an ideal married man of this sort cannot be portrayed, for the point is time in its extension. At the end of the fifteen years, he seems to have come no further than he was in the beginning, and yet to a high degree he has been living esthetically. For him his possession has not been inert property, but he has been continually acquiring its possession. He has not fought with lions and trolls but with the most dangerous enemy, which is time. But now eternity does not come afterward, as for the knight, but he has had eternity in time, has preserved eternity in time. Therefore only he has been victorious over time, for it may be said of the knight that he has killed time, just as one to whom time has no reality always

> wishes to kill time, but this is never the right victory. Like a true victor, the married man has not killed time but has rescued and preserved it in eternity. The married man who does this is truly living poetically; he solves the great riddle, to live in eternity and yet to hear the cabinet clock strike in such a way that its striking does not shorten but lengthens his eternity […] (EO II 138-139)

In what I take to be a sort of vulgar test of the theory, William goes on,

> You will be further persuaded of this by pondering the adjectives used to describe marital love. It is faithful, constant, humble, patient, long-suffering, tolerant, honest, content with little, alert, persevering, willing, happy. All these virtues have the characteristic that they are qualifications within the individual. The individual is not fighting against external enemies but is struggling with himself, struggling to bring his love out of himself. And these virtues have the qualification of time, for their veracity consists not in this, that they are once and for all, but that they are continually. And by means of these virtues nothing else is acquired; only they themselves are acquired. (EO II 139-140).

This is why marriage and married life is the consummation of the esthetic. The esthetic consists in the acquired. In a marriage, *there is not even a division between the struggle*

and the thing that is struggled for. William writes,

> When I say that the esthetic consists in the acquired, it does not at all mean that it lies in the mere striving as such. This is indeed negative, but the merely negative is never esthetic. When, however, it is a striving that in itself has content, a struggle that in itself has the victory, then in this duplexity I have the esthetic. (EO II 95).

In a marriage, there is no thing that we are trying to get that is logically separable from the actions we are performing to get it. This is so, not in the superficial sense that here engagement in the activity just is what we're aiming at. Like if I were to say that when I go skiing it's is not as though I am trying to get to the bottom of the mountain (indeed if the mountain kept falling away into new hollows forever I would hardly object); but I am, in the activity of skiing, doing the thing that I want to be doing. No, the collapse of means and ends in erotic love is much more interesting. To be married, as we have seen, is for people, places, events of the shared life to become something we strive to be true to. This activity of marriage is to constantly convert even things that could present themselves as instrumental into the intrinsically good and chosen erotic substance of the marriage.

William Afham, relating what he saw in the arbor, describes how he cannot tell whether this is the first time that William's wife is preparing the tea, or whether she does it all the time. "To be sure, the way the wife busied herself at the tea table had a practiced sureness, but nevertheless there was so much almost childlike zeal about it as if she were just married." (SLW 83). Applying William's theory of marital love, the freshness, to her,

of the event comes from the alternative way in which marital acts have a history and that, for her, possession is a constant acquiring. If one has a history then the event of the tea is, in a sense, not something repeated over and over, but the intentional act of rhythmically persevering in this thing through time, so that each event's significance is tied to the past and future of the marriage. The 2036 other times William's wife has poured the tea are not other separate little events that ruin the piquancy of this time pouring the tea—rather the 2037th time is the culmination-so-far of this one marital act and, as a moment in the thing that she actually wants—the perseverance of her marriage—is therefore just as fresh as the first time.

So William and A agree that "the esthetic consists in the acquired". But, against A, William points out that possession can itself be a kind of conquest: the conquest of the individual to bring forth his love through time.[11]

[11] Furthermore, William will not allow A to retreat to the position that whatever the joys of marriage, A's own nature is an 'conquering nature' (EO II, 130). William insists, rather, that the perseverance of love is always logically prior to the idea of conquest, even in the heart (though not the mind) of the professed esthete. As we saw in Chapter One, the first love gains its intensity from the idea of its own establishment. In erotic love, the idea of acquiring depends on the idea of possessing, and possessing cannot be left out of the intention attending the actions of the lover without mangling the experience of the esthetic itself. William says that the claim that someone has 'acquired' anything in erotic love, but not in a way so the he can persevere in it is akin to the notion that someone has conquered territory, even though he cannot hold any of the territory. It is meaningless to call such a person a conqueror. William asserts that it would, even to such a 'conqueror' himself, actually be an esthetically empty enterprise. (EO II, 132). So too with erotic love.

5: Appropriating adversities

So far in this chapter I have argued that the tea scene represents that which is done and then becomes part of what constitutes the marriage—the traditions of married life, and the gradual concretization of its satisfactions. Another aspect of Judge William's account of having a history has to do with the ability of marital love to appropriate adversities to itself, and even, in a sense, to appropriate what is left undone—in other words things that one might regret having left out of one's life. Up to now, in addressing the image of William and his wife in the arbor, I have been focusing mainly on what is best illustrated by the action of William's wife. She is, after all, the one serving the tea. William simply sits and drinks.[12] Instead, William's own task and challenge is depicted—or maybe it would be more appropriate to say that it is indicated—when his wife tempts him to regret.[13] She says:

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[12] I take it that William's notion of the difference between the female and male marital work displayed, by turns, in the tea scene, is foreshadowed in *Either/Or.* There William writes,

> In order to divest oneself of every unsound and despicable idea of comfort, this is the idea one must first and foremost link to the home, that it is a task. Even in the husband's enjoyment there ought to be an element of task, even if this does not manifest itself in a specific external tangible task. In this respect, the husband can be very active although he does not appear to be, whereas the wife's domestic activity is more visible. (EO II, 82).

[13] The issue of regret is one of the main themes threading through Parts 1 and 2 of *Either/Or.* At the beginning of *Balance Between the Esthetic and Ethical* Judge William claims that A's 'motto' is " [D]o it or do not do it, you will regret both." (EO I, 159). This corresponds to one of A's "Diapsalmata" in the first part of *Either/Or.* This begins, "Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way." (EO I, 38). This aphorism as a whole is a superlatively slippery bit of prose, and I will not try to crack open what A is trying to say

in it. But it is worthwhile, for the purposes of this thesis, to interpret what is suggested about regret here from William's emerging point of view.

One way of reading the line "Whether you marry or you do not marry, you will regret it either way", is that one is, as we say, damned if you do and damned if you don't—that in this dilemma there is no good outcome to be had, whichever way one chooses. We are doomed to be disappointed with how life turns out, because something inherently disappointing lies waiting for us at the end of either path. In *How to Read Kierkegaard,* John Caputo interprets A's motto in this straightforward way. Caputo writes that A is saying something like this: "If you marry the girl, her waist will wax and her beauty will wane; she will become a bore and will make demands upon you that you will surely regret. But if you do not marry her, the world will scorn you as a womanizer who wasted a girl's time and treated her cruelly, and that you will also regret." John Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008) 28. In other words, to Caputo, A is some species of pessimist. On this reading, A recommends that we avoid making any decisions in life, and avoid espousing any beliefs or values, in order to avoid what Caputo calls "negative consequences".

This seems to me like an erroneous way to approach the aphorism on regret. For one thing, the thought makes no sense on the face of it. Not making any decisions will still lead to *an outcome.* At least it certainly will in the example that is given, of marrying or not marrying. We all know someone who dithers about whether or not to marry. But this in no way avoids consequences. It does not even, in principle, avoid "waxing waists" or public scorn, and may lead to both.

Perhaps more interesting for our purposes, however, is that Caputo's misunderstands of the grammar of regret in a way that A does not. As a rule, regret takes as its object not a bad outcome, but the poor choices that led to it unnecessarily. Regret is reserved for those who feel that things could have been better through their own agency. It seems essential to the idea of regret that the one who regrets believes that if she hadn't done (or failed to do) what she now regrets, she would not now be regretful. If it is true that there are only bad outcomes to be had, whichever way one chooses, then this cannot be the occasion for regret.

If we want to make sense of A's aphorism, the problem can't be in outcomes; the problem itself, rather, must be in the act of espousing an act or idea. What is to be avoided is, somehow, decision itself and the influence it has on one's life. A is claiming that the way to not regret is to in some sense not do anything: to not decide. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Not because it is as a matter of fact marriage is a bad life, nor because it is as a matter of fact remaining a bachelor is a bad life, but because decision itself creates some sort of investment, and investment will ultimately set you up for experiences of loss and despair.

A's life-philosophy wherein all decision leads inevitably to regret, and that it is best to keep one foot out of all one's enterprises, is something that William's gives us a way of diagnosing. To William, A's experiences in life cause him to reach this conclusion due to the fact that the only kind of decision A knows is an esthetic decision. And it is precisely the detachment that marks A's approach to life that makes decision so problematic for him. When an esthete such as A, let us say, decides to take up painting,

> You interrupted me yesterday when I started to say this, but I have
>
> been thinking about it again; I have thought about it many times, and
>
> right now especially, and you know very well on account of whom.
>
> It is certain and true that if you had not married you would have
>
> become much greater in the world. (SLW, 84).

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the question of whether his decision was a good one remains as a matter of fact independent of his decision. Thus (according to William) the one thing that could sustain him through the hard or dull times of improving as a painter—his experience of the beauty of life as it is penetrated and changed by his choice and will to be a painter—is not there to sustain him. His doubt is, as a rule, independent of the influence of the decision on him, as he tries to "come to rest" in an "absolute" answer to the question of whether he ought to carry on with painting, as we saw in Chapter Two. Thus over and over through his life as A asks himself: "is the path I am on the right path?" the answer appears to him to be "no". His life is an endless series of regrets. The extreme life-philosophy that A espouses as a result of his experiences as an esthete—that one should never make decisions or espouse any values or beliefs—only condemns him more fully to this misery.

William circles back the idea that one will regret it either way later in *Remarks on Marriage*, where we learn that the real source of the words is an anecdote about Socrates, told by Diogenes Laertius. William writes,

> It is told that Socrates is supposed to have answered someone who asked him about marriage: Marry or do not marry— you will regret both. Socrates was an ironist who presumably concealed his wisdom and truth ironically lest it become local gossip, but he was not a mocker. The irony is superb. The questioner's stupidity lies precisely in asking a third person for something one can never learn from a third person. (SLW, 156-57).

In other words: there is no third-person fact of the matter as to whether one should marry or not. What there is is one's love, a love is animated by one's already living in light of that love's long future and activity, which would vanish if one really succeeded in divesting oneself from that activity in order to deliberate on it in a detached or objective way.

My understanding of the tea scene, as I will explain below, is that it is a portrait of a person who reflects on his life, but not in this detached way.

We are never told the person "on account of whom" she has been having these thoughts. (Perhaps it is A. Or perhaps Kierkegaard is alluding to himself. Kierkegaard had in fact become "greater in the world" with the publication of *Either/Or*. And he, in contrast to the Judge, of course, embarked on his ambitious career as a philosopher after abandoning his engagement to be married). Afham then relates William's response. "He lit the cigar, put his arm around her waist while she leaned against his shoulder, turned his head aside to blow away the smoke, then rested his eyes on her with all the devotion a look can communicate, yet smiling, although this smile of joy was tinged with sad irony." (SLW, 84). While she explicates at length all the ways that he could have been "greater in the world", William begins humming a ballad and drumming his fingers on the table. He jokes that he may have to beat her to make her silent. They then, as I have said, disappear together arm in arm down a wooded path.

William's wife is inviting him to reflect on the possibility that he is encumbered by his marriage, that he could have been a bigger and more important man. This reflection is no trivial thing. It is nothing less than the sort of gnawing regret that ruins a marriage or makes someone a terrible spouse. What do we make of William's response to it?

First we should note that the threat of regret is not something that someone in first love has to deal with. William writes that when first love comes on the scene, the beloved seems like the whole world: "[T]he first love is an absolute awakening, an absolute intuiting"; "It is directed upon a single specific actual object, which alone exists for it; nothing else exists at all." (EO II, 42). William is here describing the ecstatic way that

love fixates on a specific person. But there is a flip side to this. As the first love fixates on a single specific being "which alone exists for it", it is a characteristic of being in first love that in a sense there is no other path, no other option or candidate for one's attentions. Falling in love leaves anything that clashes with the love feeling unreal, as though it belongs to the life of someone else. The more totally we find ourselves in the first flash of love, the less there is of real, felt value to the individual that is to be sacrificed and left behind in order to instead choose this love. Knausgaard writes in *My Struggle*, "[Our friends] said we were impossible to be with, we had eyes only for each other, and it was true, there was no world beyond the one we had built." (MS II, 226). First love possesses a conviction of its ongoingness, but this conviction is able to persist, in part, through a kind of myopathy, a magnification of the beloved as the whole world of existence or value.

For the married man, by contrast, the situation is somewhat different, and I think it is part of the point of the tea scene that we can note the difference. William, I take it, is quite aware that there are other goods in life. William writes in *Esthetic Validity of Marriage*, for example, "I have not sacrificed my life to art and science; compared with them, that to which I have sacrificed my life is but a trifle. I sacrifice myself to my work, my wife, my children, or, to be more accurate, I do not sacrifice myself to them but find my joy and satisfaction in them. These are trifles compared with what you are living for […]." (EO II, 170). William writes at length of the threat of being "lost in the minutiae" of married life. He writes to A:

> How often have you not gloated over the outraged sensibilities of

> such family men at all the petty details that life entails, when the children have to be spanked, when they spill on themselves, when they scream, when the great man— the father— feels frustrated in his venturesomeness by the thought that his children tie him to the earth? How often have you not with well-deserved cruelty brought such noble fathers to the peak of suppressed rage when you, occupied exclusively with his children, dropped a few words about what a blessing it really is to have children? (EO II, 69).

William doesn't stare blankly at his wife when she speaks of regret. William is aware of the things he has foregone in order to be in his marriage. His smile is tinged with sad irony. It is my belief that in the moment William is looking at his wife he is reflecting on the things she is saying. Understanding William means understanding that he is not refusing to reflect (though it can certainly look like he is), but that he is reflecting in an ethical mode that the esthetic onlookers cannot understand. William's wife brings up being "greater in the world" and he thinks on this. But he does so in a way that incorporates it into his marriage, rather than allowing the possibility to be a competitor to it. There is, on the one hand, the sort of self-reflection in which one stands back from one's past choices and commitments and appraises one's real satisfactions in married life—including one's love—in comparison to the things that could have been in one had taken another direction. In other words there is doubt. On the other hand, there is devotion. There is the self-knowledge that is available to us only with our own action, because the action is how that self comes to be constituted.

The tea scene, as I understand it, is supposed to show us marital love in its world. This is a world of obstacle, opposition, temptation, that is not ignored, *but is, rather, appropriated to the marital love*. William writes that the decision of marriage is, in fact, made in light of just such adversities, though these have not yet "assumed a definite shape" (EO II, 109).

> Marital love […] has not only apriority in itself but also constancy in itself, and the energizing power in this constancy is the same as the law of motion— it is the intention. In the intention, something else is posited, but this something else is also posited as something surmounted; in the intention, this something else is posited as an internal something else, inasmuch as even the external is seen in its reflection in the internal. The historical consists in the emergence of this something else and the acquiring of its validity, but precisely in its validity it is seen as something that should not have validity. Thus love, tested and purified, issues from this movement and assimilates what is experienced. (EO II, 98).[14]

[14] It is a little unclear, if one reads this passage in isolation, what William is referring by this "something else" that is "also posited". A few pages later he makes it clear that this "something else" is the yet-to-emerge adversities that the marriage will encounter:

> Now, in my insisting that adversity is part of marriage, I by no means permit you to identify marriage with a retinue of adversities. It is already implicit in the resignation contained in the resolution, as previously explained, that there will be accompanying adversities, except that these have not as yet assumed a definite shape and are not alarming, since on the contrary they are already seen as overcome in the resolution. Furthermore, adversity is not seen

In the "I do", the marriage doesn't just anticipate that there will be to-be-determined difficulties. With the marriage, the spouses project the possibility of a love *that overcomes obstacles and appropriates adversities and losses* to itself, and they choose *this* love as their object. He writes, "Intention is resignation in its richest form, in which the concern is not for what is to be lost but for what is to be gained by being held fast." (EO II, 61). Thus, William posits, if he is a truly married individual, any traumatic experience of his domestic difficulties are difficult always and only in proportion to the love that becomes larger in rising to the occasion of overcoming them.

I take it that the scene as a whole is meant to bring to mind the Garden of Eden. We are presented with a man and woman in a walled-in arbor in the early morning. They are totally oblivious to the ring of jaded banqueters that surround them literally lined up around the walls of the arbor, an obliviousness that gives a mood of innocence to them. Eve's temptation to taste the fruit of the forbidden tree and gain divine knowledge is, instead, like William's wife's temptation that William should dwell on not being "greater in the world". But instead of a fruit, William's wife hands him a cup of tea, the same cup, presumably, she presents him every morning. Instead of the Fall and banishment, they disappear down a wooded path—deeper, that is, into the garden. God commanded Adam not to eat of the tree of knowledge. It is as though the moral of Kierkegaard's retelling of the story there is an ethical, not esthetic, self-knowledge that is compatible with a kind of paradise.

> externally but internally in its reflexion in the individual, but this belongs to the shared history of marital love. (EO II, 109).

William writes,

> When a person has arrived at an understanding of himself, has had the courage to be willing to see himself, it by no means thereby follows that the story is now past history, for now it begins, now for the first time it gains its real meaning, in that every single experienced moment is led back to this total view. So it is also in marriage. In this disclosure, the immediacy of first love founders, yet it is not lost but is caught up in the joint marital consciousness, and with this the history begins, and to this joint marital consciousness the particular detail is led back, and therein lies its happiness, a term in which the historical character of marriage is preserved and which corresponds to the joy of life or what the Germans call Heiterkeit [serenity], which the first love has. (EO II, 118).

In general, I find the idea of a "joint marital consciousness" unfortunately very underdeveloped in William's writings. But in this image of leading each detail back to the marriage and marriage's self-understanding I take it that we have a formulation of the alternative form of reflection that William thinks is at the center of marital love. Every experienced moment—even moments like being reminded that one could have been greater in the world—is led back to this total view, this self-understanding, and in that way given meaning. William writes here that in this "the immediacy of first love

founders." The old immediacy founders because the experienced erotic moment is no longer the spontaneous source of meaning and energy, as it was in the first flash of love. Instead, each experience is now to be 'led over' to the larger life-project of marriage, a background against which the moment is interpreted and valued, in other words by which the moment is mediated. Thus its loss of the *old* immediacy. But there is a new immediacy: the validity of this marriage to us, in turn, depends on our emotional marital love, which is itself rejuvenated by this conscious act of appropriation.

It is William Afham who relates the tea scene. Judge William himself never narrates any details of his own life to illustrate his arguments about the glory of marriage. Although William constantly adduces his own marriage as proof of the happiness of the married state, one looks in vain for what we would today call personal or private anecdote in his writings. In a way, this is entirely appropriate. William says that the marriage must involve secrecy. [15] Not secrecy in the sense that the esthete, A, imagines it, where the two lovers keep secrets from each other, so that a sense of surprise and discovery pervades the relationship and keeps life interesting. According to William,

[15] One way of thinking about the progression of the three parts of *Stages on Life's Way* is of the words being unearthed from states of greater and greater secrecy. First is *In Vino Veritas*, where the revelers' thoughts are elicited by the help of wine, never to be repeated (until Afham breaks the pact). Next is the judge's manuscript, stolen from his study. Last is the manuscript that Frater Taciturnus literally fishes out of the bottom of Søborg Lake, sealed in a box whose key he finds locked inside, sunken (by Taciturnus' calculation) for nearly a hundred years.

In the case of William's text, the spying and the stealing of the manuscript reminds one of the detention of Socrates in the *Republic* and the "Apology". In other words it is in line with the theme that the philosopher does not solicit one's attention. Though here, perhaps, are the roles reversed? The partygoers, who spin dialectical high art, are the ones standing on the outside spying, and who purloin the words of William, who himself admits to being limited philosophically.

rather, in a true marriage the husband and wife reveal themselves *to each other* completely. The secret, rather, is kept by the two of them from the rest of us (EO II, 104). It has to do with their appreciation that the true self-knowledge they possess in their ethical state—the self-knowledge that is only possible when the self in its passions is perfected by their choosing—can have no corresponding validity for others outside the marriage. This, I take it, is why the only true vignette of married life in the texts is the tea time related by Afham.

We saw before that the kind of self-understanding that is possible in relation to erotic love is actually an ethical self-understanding. One can never stand back and merely take note of the existence of one's own erotic love as a premise for decision, for the erotic love essentially exists as our own willfulness in relation to its existence. In an entirely different way, we can have ethical self-knowledge of our love. This self-knowledge, however, is never the end of our own activity; it is always also a beginning. In saying "I do", the two married people disclose to each other who they are: not who they already were, but who they become through the words.

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