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KIERKEGAARD'S AESTHETE AND UNAMUNO'S *NIEBLA*

THE TERM "AESTHETIC" is used in various ways in Søren Kierkegaard's authorship; at least three fundamental meanings can be distinguished: (1) the aesthetic as a "stage of existence," in contrast to the ethical and religious stages; (2) the aesthetic as a theory of the artistic, especially the beautiful; (3) the aesthetic as a dimension of human existence. In this paper we support the claim of Sylvia Walsh that there is a fundamental link between the second and third of these senses in Kierkegaard. In her book, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics*, Walsh argues that for Kierkegaard the aesthetic ideal is best realized in authentic human existence rather than abstract beauty. "Kierkegaard's aesthetics is primarily concerned with the artistic representation or reduplication of the existential ideal of the self in human life."¹ Thus Kierkegaard's aesthetics (in the sense of a theory of art and the beautiful) has more to do with the "fulfillment of human personality" than with "artistic creativity and representation in traditional forms of art."² The beautiful is to be found in an integrated self, one that is freely chosen.

One way of understanding Kierkegaard's stages of existence is to see them as embodying distinctive views as to what it might mean to live artistically. Such a perspective makes sense of the way Kierkegaard himself ranked the stages. Many follow Alasdair MacIntyre's reading of Kierkegaard, in which the various stages of existence are rivals and require a "radical choice" for which no reason can be given.³ From MacIntyre's perspective, it makes no sense to see one stage as "higher" than another except insofar as one has made an arbitrary commitment to one stage. However, Kierkegaard himself viewed a movement from the aesthetic to the ethical and on to the religious as a progression. If it

can be shown that the goals of the aesthete are realized more adequately by the ethical person, this would show that ethical life is superior to aesthetic existence, even when judged on aesthetic grounds.

This is precisely the kind of argument made by Judge William, the pseudonymous author of *Either/Or* II, against the aesthetic stage. The Judge does not, for example, argue that one must commit to doing one's duty rather than seek for the beautiful, as some moralists might claim. Rather, he argues that the aesthetic life in all its forms is beset by boredom and despair. In Volume I of *Either/Or*, the pseudonymous aesthete A anticipates this criticism, and attempts to show how boredom may be kept at bay through the art of "remembering and forgetting." A recommends a detached attitude toward existence, maintained through arbitrariness, which allows an individual to view life's experiences as raw materials for aesthetic enjoyment.

The prime example of this disinterested distancing of life that spurns normal human relationships, but rather uses them for sport, is found in "The Seducer's Diary." There are many parallels to be drawn between the "Diary" and the beginning of Unamuno's *Niebla*, which will be seen later. For now, it should be noted that the seduction described in the "Diary" is of a psychological and not of a physical sort. The seduction is described by A as a two-stage mind game played by the reflective aesthete. "In the first case, he personally enjoyed the esthetic; in the second case, he esthetically enjoyed his personality."⁴ In other words, he enjoyed all of the machinations required to bring about the seduction and then glowed with the knowledge that he could accomplish such a thing. The actual consummation of the seduction is not what matters to this aesthete. It is the grand scheme that fascinates the Seducer, so that once the woman has succumbed, she holds no interest for him whatsoever. "Now all resistance is impossible, and to love is beautiful only as long as resistance is present; as soon as it ceases, to love is weakness and habit. I do not want to be reminded of my relationship with her; she has lost her fragrance" (*EO1*, p. 445). This is the only sort of love that is interesting to the reflective aesthete; he even thinks he has done the young woman a favor by making her life more interesting. The Seducer adheres to one supreme value: "Has the interesting been preserved at all times?" (*EO1*, pp. 437–38).

In *Either/Or* II Judge William counters A's "aesthetic" view of existence with the claim that the ethical life, "is so far from depriving life of its beauty that it expressly gives it beauty" (*EO2*, p. 323). Part of the beauty of life for the Judge consists in having a calling or vocation. The

Judge sees a calling as something particularly expressed in work, and thus he views work not as an unfortunate necessity, but a universal good that makes life beautiful. "The duty to work in order to live expresses the universally human and in another sense expresses the universal also, for it expresses freedom" (*EO2*, p. 282). Depreciating the desire to fall into a fortune, the Judge says that a man should "not be irritated by life's conditions," but rather should "feel the beauty in working for a living" because "he will feel his human dignity in it" (*EO2*, p. 283). The ethical view is superior to the aesthetic view precisely because it recognizes the universal need to work and secondly, the ethical "conceives of the human being according to his perfection, views him according to his true beauty" (*EO2*, p. 288).

The Judge recognizes that the aesthete is not completely averse to activity. The aesthete may in fact take pride in his or her talents, using them as "wings" to fly above the crowd and find pleasure. However, for the Judge this is inadequate because talents are accidents; some people have them and others do not. Genuine human happiness cannot depend on such contingencies, but rather must be grounded in something all humans can realize. Since every person has a calling, the ethicist calls on the aesthete to find his vocation, the tasks that he has been called to do. A calling is not dependent on any particular talent, though talents can and should be used in a calling if possible. "The ethical view, then, that every human being has a calling, has two advantages over the esthetic theory of talent. First, it does not explain [*forklare*] anything accidental in existence but the universal; second, it shows the universal in its true beauty. In other words, the talent is not beautiful until it is transfigured [*forklaret*] into a calling, and existence is not beautiful until every person has a calling" (*EO2*, p. 293).⁵ In what follows we will show that this aesthetic critique of the aesthete is powerfully exhibited in Miguel de Unamuno's novel *Niebla*.

Miguel de Unamuno read Kierkegaard in 1901 when the first *Samlede Værker* began to be published with the two volumes of *Either/Or*.⁶ In "Ibsen and Kierkegaard," Unamuno explains, "It was Brandes, the critic of Ibsen who introduced me to Kierkegaard, and if I began to learn Danish in order to translate more than anything else Ibsen's *Brand*, it has been the works of Kierkegaard, his spiritual father, which have made me glad to have learned it."⁷

The extent of Kierkegaard's influence on Unamuno has been debated for 50 years. We believe that Unamuno was profoundly influenced by Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works which (1) see the self as

something that one must choose, (2) define the stages of existence (aesthetic, ethical, religious) and (3) set forth the need for communicating *indirectly* when talking about authentic existence, so that the individual can freely appropriate truth. In particular, we believe that Unamuno used Kierkegaard's three stages of existence as the inspiration for three of his memorable protagonists. We see Augusto Pérez of *Niebla* as emblematic of the aesthetic stage, Don Manuel of *San Manuel Bueno, mártir* as embodying the sphere of the ethical and Joaquín Monegro of *Abel Sánchez* as Unamuno's intimation of the religious sphere. Justifying such a claim for all of these protagonists would require a book. Here we will show that Augusto Pérez, along with other characters of *Niebla*, is a fictional rendering by Unamuno of the Kierkegaardian sphere of the aesthetic. Such a reading of Unamuno's character will illuminate the richness of the aesthetic sphere as portrayed in *Either/Or* I, but it will also allow for a critique of Unamuno's protagonist (and the aesthetic stage) through the insights of Judge William in *Either/Or* II.

Niebla is the story of Augusto Pérez who so lacks direction in his life that he waits for a dog to cross his path to decide the course of his somnambulant walk. While walking he stumbles across a woman, Eugenia, whom he "loves" at first sight. Augusto mounts a campaign to conquer the woman, but she toys with him, having already set her sights on Mauricio, an unemployed slacker. In the meantime, Augusto finds himself attracted to many women. Feeling conflicted, he asks his married friend, Víctor for advice. Víctor says it doesn't matter whom Augusto marries; he should just act. Augusto asks Eugenia one last time to marry him, and she accepts, although for unclear reasons. Instead of feeling victorious, Augusto feels trapped. After a tense courtship, Eugenia runs off with Mauricio, the good-for-nothing boyfriend, leaving the suffering Augusto to again question his own existence in a unique encounter with the author of his story. The dramatized author, Don Miguel, tells Augusto that he can't even kill himself because he doesn't really exist.

Many of the characters of *Niebla* live out the categories of the aesthetic as outlined in *Either/Or* I. Mauricio can be seen as the "immediate" aesthete who is non-reflective and grabs at what is immediately at hand, like the Don Juan discussed in *Either/Or* I. Eugenia herself is an aesthete whose disregard for Augusto sounds like Judge William's indictment of A in *Either/Or* II, "You can be more heartless than anyone; you can make a jest of everything, even a person's pain" (*EO2*, p. 232).

Víctor's own marriage is a form of aesthetic marriage. He and his wife were forced to marry by their parents, but as good aesthetes they have made interesting what life arbitrarily dealt to them, as A instructs in "Rotation of Crops." Augusto is a hyper-contemplative aesthete with an intellectualized approach to life, who seems quite similar to Johannes, the author of the infamous "Seducer's Diary" that concludes *Either/Or I*.

Ruth House Webber outlines the similarities between "The Seducer's Diary" and the first part of *Niebla* in her article, "Kierkegaard and the Elaboration of Unamuno's *Niebla*."⁸ She notes that both works begin with the protagonist on the street, alone with his thoughts in the midst of a multitude of people. Both Johannes (the Seducer) and Augusto come upon the woman who mesmerizes them completely by chance. When the vision has vanished before their eyes and each wants to recreate the woman in his mind's eye, neither can remember what she looked like. Both Johannes and Augusto are fascinated with the names of their beloved. Both Eugenia and Cordelia are orphans, living with aunts whom both suitors know they must win over before the desired relationship can proceed.⁹

Though Webber's observations are well taken, it should be noted that at the beginning of the novel Augusto is a man who has not even reached the level of the aesthetic. One might think that this is impossible. The aesthetic sphere is the state to which we are born; it is not something to be chosen. Children are perfect aesthetes, requiring their needs and desires to be met immediately with little reflection. In general, that is the way that the aesthetic sphere is understood in the Kierkegaardian corpus. But in one place, which catches the attention of Unamuno so much so that he underlines it in the Danish text, Judge William uses the term "aesthetic" in a somewhat special way:

And this is what is sad when one contemplates human life, that so many live out their lives in quiet lostness; they outlive themselves, not in the sense that life's content successively unfolds and is now possessed in this unfolding, but they live, as it were, away from themselves and vanish like shadows. Their immortal souls are blown away, and they are not disquieted by the question of its immortality, because they are already disintegrated before they die. They do not live esthetically, but neither has the ethical become manifest to them in its wholeness; nor have they actually rejected it, and therefore they are not sinning either, except insofar as it is a sin to be neither one thing nor the other. (*EO2*, pp. 168–69)

Here the aesthetic refers to a project that a person can adopt, the project of living artistically. In this sense the aesthetic is something that can be chosen and that one can fail to reach. Hence the Judge talks about the sadness of those who do not even live aesthetically, who live in “quiet lostness” and “vanish like shadows” and are never “disquieted by the question of immortality” (*EO2*, pp. 168–69). In this special sense Unamuno sees the aesthetic sphere as a move toward authentic existence and a real choice. Unamuno’s protagonist, Augusto, moves *from* a boring life with so little direction that he lets a dog determine his path *to* toying with the idea of marriage through several imagined affairs. Augusto becomes interesting to himself through his suffering, although in this case, suffering is yet another aesthetic category.

In *Either/Or* II, Judge William gives a detailed account of various aesthetic life views ranging from the immediate to the reflective. This range is illustrated in *Either/Or* I, which begins with the immediacy of Don Juan and ends with the highly reflective author of “The Seducer’s Diary.” Immediate aesthetic life views value health and beauty, wealth and noble birth, enjoying life and satisfying all desires. The Judge knows that A has moved on from such pedestrian forms of aestheticism to the more cerebral as described in “Rotation of Crops.” Most importantly A has come to enjoy his own despair over the vanity that besets immediate forms of the aesthetic life. The Judge addresses A, “This may be the place to discuss briefly a life-view that is so very pleasing to you. . . . It amounts to nothing less than this, that to sorrow is indeed the real meaning of life, and to be the unhappiest one is the supreme happiness” (*EO2*, p. 232). The Judge explains that for A, “sorrow in and by itself is at least as interesting as joy” (*EO2*, p. 233).

Augusto admits that his entire conversation with Víctor about how much he has suffered at Eugenia’s hand is, in fact, entertaining, though it irritates him to say so. Víctor’s judgment is that through his suffering Augusto has become more interesting to himself. “Have you ever been more interesting to your own eyes than you are now? How does one know if he has a limb if it doesn’t hurt him?” (*OC*, p. 663). As we have noted earlier, the reflective aesthete’s motto is, “Has the interesting been preserved at all times?” (*EO1*, p. 438). Víctor congratulates Augusto for his maturation in the process of becoming interesting; from the perspective of A of *Either/Or* I he is more of a true aesthete.

Another telling characteristic of the aesthete of *Either/Or* I seen in Augusto is the desire to be in control. Augusto does not abandon Eugenia as the Seducer abandons Cordelia, but the point at which he

no longer has control of the situation is a point of major distress. Thinking about his proposal to Eugenia as part of a psychological experiment, Augusto wonders how he will feel if Eugenia accepts his proposal: "And what if she accepts me? That would mess things up. What if she catches me with my own hook! That would surely be the fisherman becoming his own prey" (*OC*, p. 644). When Eugenia does accept, Augusto does not feel elated, but trapped. He thinks, "Frog, complete frog! They have trapped me between all of them" (*OC*, p. 652). For the aesthete, the process is fascinating, but the result may need to be forgotten.

If Augusto cannot control Eugenia, he at least tries to control his destiny. Full of doubt and confusion after Víctor says that they both are no more than characters in a *nivola*, Augusto resolves to kill himself. But before he does, he believes that he needs to consult with the dramatized author of his story, Don Miguel. Don Miguel informs Augusto that he knows he has come to discuss his impending suicide, and then lets the squirming Augusto know that his contemplated act of suicide is impossible because he doesn't exist. Augusto is outraged and turns on his author to question the author's existence. Isn't it possible that Don Miguel is a fictitious entity who is nothing more than "a pretext for bringing my story into the world" (*OC*, p. 666)? Don Miguel gets more and more uncomfortable with Augusto's line of reasoning and retaliates by saying that he will kill Augusto off.

Augusto goes back to his home and essentially eats himself to death. Does Augusto kill himself, or does the dramatized author, Don Miguel, kill off his own character? Víctor Goti, the writer of the prologue assures the reader that it was Augusto himself who brought about his own death. Augusto's housekeeper, Liduvina, swears it was a suicide. But Don Miguel enters the narrative to claim responsibility and to wonder whether he should bring Augusto back to life. Unamuno leaves the ending ambiguous in the novel, but in a later essay entitled, "Una entrevista con Augusto Pérez," Unamuno says that Augusto insisted to him in a dream, "I affirmed myself in dying" (*OC*, p. 365). For this aesthete, the element of control is more important than living.

From Judge William's point of view, the bankruptcy of the lives of the characters of *Niebla* is due to their lack of a calling. Mauricio, Eugenia's boyfriend, resists the idea of work altogether. Eugenia's aunt says that he is a *gandul*, a lazybones, and he himself says, "I was born a loafer by temperament, I don't deny it" (*OC*, p. 610). Eugenia is an aesthete who

does have a talent, but for whom the talent is not part of a calling. She is a piano teacher and makes the little that she has from her students. She is willing to continue the work, though she hates it, to get Mauricio to marry her. To spite Mauricio, but also to have her way, Eugenia accepts Augusto's proposal, but she withdraws from Augusto emotionally and physically. Her cool behavior contributes to Augusto's feeling trapped. In order to rekindle the fire, Augusto asks her to play the piano for him while he writes poetry to express his love. She curtly tells him she is marrying him is so that she never has to play the piano again.

Eugenia's ultimate plan is to have Augusto get the job for Mauricio which Mauricio will not get for himself. Claiming that Mauricio is still pursuing her and won't give up, she suggests that Augusto get a job for him somewhere far away so that he will leave them in peace. Augusto does her bidding, not knowing that Eugenia will then, three days before their wedding, take off with Mauricio to go to the far away job. It is here that Eugenia shows herself to be the "heartless" aesthete whose disregard for Augusto makes "a jest of everything, even a person's pain," as the Judge says to A (*EO2*, p. 232).

Augusto's lack of calling is more than evident from the start. His pre-aesthetic existence is meandering and meaningless. His chance encounter with Eugenia provides what he believes will be a reason for living, but it proves to be nothing more than a reason to make life interesting. Soon after falling in love with Eugenia Augusto meets his friend, Víctor, in the Casino for their daily game of chess. When Víctor chides him for being late, Augusto pleads that he had *quehaceres* (tasks) that he had to attend to. Víctor scoffs, "Tasks, you?" (*OC*, p. 564). Víctor knows that Augusto is rich and does not need to work; nor has he taken up any calling.

There is no denying that Augusto himself says that he has awakened to existence through the pain of his relationship with Eugenia, but we believe that Unamuno understands that awakening still to be entirely within the aesthetic. In *Stages on Life's Way*, Unamuno underlines part of Victor Eremita's speech at the banquet of aesthetes, "In Vino Veritas." "The highest ideality woman can awaken in man is really to awaken the consciousness of immortality."¹⁰ Eremita goes on to explain that "woman's entire meaning is negative" because the only way she can awaken this consciousness is to be a negative influence in his life. Fate makes sure that she arrives at precisely the right moment, just as Eugenia arrived at precisely the right moment for Augusto. Victor Eremita continues:

But now comes the greatest thing she can do for a man—that is to be unfaithful to him, the sooner the better. The first ideality will help him to an intensified ideality, and he is helped absolutely. To be sure, this second ideality is purchased with the deepest pain, but it is also the greatest blessing. To be sure, he can by no means wish it before it has happened, but this is why he thanks her that it has happened, and since he, humanly speaking, does not have much reason to be so very thankful, all is well. But woe to him if she remains faithful to him!¹¹

Unamuno's Augusto is the literary result of Victor Eremita's advice. Augusto is awakened through a negative relationship with a woman, but like Eremita, he remains an aesthete to the end.

Unamuno may even see Augusto as being "situated at the perilous point at which the esthetic is to pass over into the ethical" that the Judge describes (*EO2*, p. 232). Augusto might have gone on to the ethical if he had chosen to stay alive as he says he wants to do in his interview with Don Miguel. Augusto equates living with becoming a self. Don Miguel's insinuation that only he [Don Miguel] will decide what sort of self Augusto will be is a challenge to the contemplative aesthete to act. Augusto's maturation has not come to the point of believing enough in his own existence to choose to live and enter into the ethical life. But he has reached the point of wanting decisively to show that he, at the very least, is doing the choosing, and therefore, taking control, he chooses to die. The choice here is what is crucial and what was crucial for Unamuno from the start.

Judge William would criticize Augusto's aesthetic existence in the same way that he censured A. Augusto's life is lived for the sake of the interesting, distancing himself from others so as not to make real commitments, so that in *recollecting* and *forgetting* he could maintain control. But such a life is devoid of beauty. Beauty is found in fulfilling the commitments of a calling, a calling that is not dependent on the accident of talent or even the accident of not having to work for the necessities of life. In advice that could be applied to Augusto, the Judge admonishes A, who does not have to work, to "acquire the conditions for living" by "mastering your innate depression" (*EO2*, p. 289). The Judge sees A's despair as being the means whereby he will either break free and take on the duties of the ethical life or the means by which he will destroy himself. "But watch yourself so that you do not fall into the opposite extreme, into a demented defiance that consumes the power

to hide pain instead of utilizing it to bear and conquer it" (*EO2*, p. 289). Augusto hides his pain and in demented defiance kills himself.

Either/Or ends without the reader knowing whether A takes the Judge's advice. Unamuno gives us a fictional rendering of the aesthetic life that shows its logical end, though Unamuno may not have had that purpose in mind. For Unamuno, Kierkegaard's existence spheres provide a vehicle to express multiple and even contradictory truths about the self and about the struggle that leads to authentic existence. Unamuno is not interested in Judge William's claims about the beauty of life being found in one's calling, but the reader of *Either/Or* and *Niebla* can come to her own conclusion. At the very least, Augusto's story demonstrates that the sphere of "the aesthetic" does not achieve Kierkegaard's "aesthetics" of an integrated, fully existing self.

This hardly amounts to a proof of the superiority of the ethical life to the aesthetic life. It is not an argument that would necessarily convince an aesthete. However, Kierkegaard himself clearly rejects the epistemological ideal so characteristic of modern philosophy, an ideal that seeks for arguments that are universally convincing. He recognizes that one cannot see the worth of the ethical life without ethical passion, and thus that the ideal of a "presuppositionless philosophy" or a final rational system is a vain one. The fact that not everyone will be able to see that the form of existence exhibited by A in *Either/Or* and by Augusto Perez in *Niebla* is bankrupt does not mean that there is nothing to see or that those who see this are deluded. Both Kierkegaard and Unamuno believe in "indirect communication," and one way that truth is communicated indirectly is when the reader is forced to confront a literary character. Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous author of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, makes the point very powerfully: "Take a character like Johannes the Seducer. The person who needs to have him become insane or shoot himself in order to see that his standpoint is perdition does not actually see it but deludes himself into thinking that he does. In other words, the person who comprehends it comprehends it as soon as the Seducer opens his mouth; in every word he hears the ruination and the judgment upon him."¹² Readers of Unamuno's *Niebla* may well make the same judgment on Augusto Perez.

1. Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), p. 9.
2. Walsh, p. 21.
3. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 36–50.
4. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vols. 1 and 2, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), vol. 1, p. 305. Subsequent references to this work (*EO*) appear in parentheses by volume and page number.
5. We have slightly modified the Hong translation here.
6. In his Introduction to *An Unamuno Source Book, An Unamuno Sourcebook* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), p. xx, Mario Valdés indicates that Unamuno purchased each of the volumes of Kierkegaard's *Samlede Værker* published between 1901 and 1906. All of the volumes are marked with underlining and notes except Volumes V and VIII.
7. We have used the edition of *Niebla* in the *Obras completas* of Miguel de Unamuno that is edited by M. García Blanco (Madrid: Escelicer, 1966–71), 3: 289. All translations are ours, and all citations of this work (*OC*) are parenthetically documented in the text by volume and page number.
8. Ruth House Webber, "Kierkegaard and the Elaboration of *Niebla*," *Hispanic Review* 22 (1964): 118–34.
9. Webber, pp. 121–22.
10. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 60.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
12. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 297.