

It's Hip to Be a Square:  
Remedying A's Historical Alienation in Either/Or  
by Karen Rustad

In "The Unhappiest One," A is at his lowest. He seems resigned that his detached aesthetic beliefs necessarily doom him to being the unhappiest one. Nevertheless, he is committed to aesthetics; embracing uncritical, inane immediacy is simply not an option. Thus, to address A, his friend Wilhelm must enter the aesthetic worldview. In "The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage" Wilhelm argues for a more flexible aesthetic interpretation that would allow A to re-engage with history and find happiness through customs like marriage.

A understands that in order to be happy, one must live in the present. In "The Unhappiest One," his search for the least happy human being starts with those who live in the future, then moves to those who live in the past. A argues that both of these are unhappy "to the extent that [they] renounce...the present" and lose sight of themselves (215). Nevertheless, it is possible for someone "[to find] himself present in the past" or future depending on whether he accepts his past or fulfils his hope, respectively. Furthermore, even though both of these kinds of people have lost touch with the present, they still have one half of eternity to look to.

A's search for the unhappiest person ends with aestheticists, who have neither past, present, nor future. The aestheticist must avoid owning his actions and thus puts his own history at a distance. As A mentions in "The Rotation Method," learning to forget is a very important part of the ironist worldview and "the final measure of one's elasticity of spirit" (27). Unencumbered by history, the aestheticist can then flit from one lifestyle or lover to another. The ironist also cannot set goals for the future because he would then have to take responsibility for them. This leaves only the present. While in "The Rotation Method" A seems to think of himself as living for the moment, by the time he writes "The Unhappiest One" A has changed his mind. The aestheticist does not engage with his daily life, but watches it like a drama on a screen. He is not "present" in his present.

Rather, like Johannes in “The Seducer’s Diary,” he spends all his time planning out the next stage of the drama in such detail that he is essentially remembering it before it happens. By confusing memory with hope, the ironist finds himself completely disengaged from time and yet not eternal in any positive sense. In this way, A believes himself to be the unhappiest one.

In “The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage,” Wilhelm responds to A’s temporal quandary first by questioning A’s interpretation of the aesthetic lifestyle. A seems to think that aesthetic standards for life are the same as those for art. This explains why he feels the need to be “constantly outside [himself]”—he is treating his life like any other artwork, where there is a distance between subject and object. Wilhelm begins his essay with the observation that if one looks at life in this fashion, it makes sense that only the momentary first love would be of interest to an aestheticist because that is what is glorified in fiction: while “in [love’s] first outflaming” a protagonist “could not suffer enough hardships in acquiring possession of the beloved” (81). Few, if any, works of fiction glorify everyday married love; far more ridicule it. Yet, Wilhelm argues, just because marriage does not conform to the aesthetic standards of drama does not mean that marriage is not a beautiful thing:

When, then, I willingly admit that romantic love lends itself more aptly to artistic representation than does conjugal love, this is not by any means to say that the latter is less aesthetic than the former; on the contrary, it is more aesthetic. In one of the tales of the Romantic School which evinces the greatest genius, there is one character who has no desire to write poetry like the others among whom he lives, because it is a waste of time and deprives him of the true enjoyment; he prefers to live. ... [He] would have been the man for me. (89)

By establishing that the standards for what is aesthetic are more permissive than what A has originally considered, Wilhelm can proceed to advocating actions that require one to be present to oneself, such as marriage, on aesthetic grounds.

As a counterpoint to A’s “Unhappiest One,” Wilhelm argues that marriage creates conditions for happiness in eternity by uniting past, present, and future. The first spark of marriage is of course romantic love, found in the present. Unlike A, who worries about “a

certain pleasure or experience...acquiring too strong a hold upon the mind” and thus must move from love to love quickly, this romantic love is allowed to be deepened and transfigured by marriage (27). Marriage envelopes the past because it becomes ever richer the more memories it has to build upon: “[I]f in the present year the individual experiences an erotic moment, this is enhanced by the fact that he recollects it in the preceding year, etc. In a beautiful way this has also found expression in married life” (92). Perhaps marriage reaches even farther back into history than the start of the actual relationship. Wilhelm himself seems sceptical about the idea that two people might be “fated” for one another, but he still states the argument because of its aesthetic appeal:

[I]s it not beautiful to imagine that two beings are meant for one another? How often one has felt the need of reaching out beyond the historical consciousness, a longing, a nostalgia for the primeval forest which lies behind us. And does not this longing acquire a double significance when with it there is associated the conception of another being which also has its home in these regions? (82)

Finally, marriage duty, the “old friend,” calls upon the spouse to carry his relationship into the future (95). The relationship is “not...like dead property, but [the spouse] has constantly been acquiring his possession. He has not fought with lions and ogres, but with the most dangerous enemy—with time” (88). The marriage commitment creates a sort of romantic heroism through its very continuity. While this “inward history” may not be the subject of many plays or sonnets, it still makes life interesting while encouraging a continuous, engaged, “eternal” self. Married people “constantly have in the present...both hope and recollection” which to Wilhelm is the “true present” (92).

Throughout Kierkegaard’s writing, it is clear that he finds it most effective to address his readers’ emotional worries for what they are, rather than abstract argumentation. He is aware that no logical argument is going to affect someone caught up in deep depression or angst. Wilhelm seems to use this same knowledge in his letter to A. If A is attached enough

to his aesthetic beliefs to accept them as a given even when he is in the depths of despair, how could Wilhelm imagine to successfully refute them with abstract logic? Thus, Wilhelm addresses A on A's own grounds and A's own criteria, modifying them only slightly. This strategy allows Wilhelm to offer A a way out of his historical alienation and into normal society, while avoiding coming off as a square.