
Kierkegaard's Coachman

by Robert Ackermann

Kierkegaard's carriage is large enough to contain the whole world in that the only world that concerns Kierkegaard can fit comfortably inside. In the *Diary of the Seducer*, Johannes offers Cordelia a place in the carriage, since on his conception of a perfect and exhaustive relationship with Cordelia, the two of them would fill the carriage. At the end of the *Diary*, Johannes waits for his coachman, and then rides somewhere alone. But in what direction is the coachman driving his horses? Commentators have uniformly placed the carriage in motion towards Cordelia, towards the culmination of a long and carefully orchestrated seduction. I will argue that the carriage moves in precisely the opposite direction. At the crucial point in the text, the physical clues to the direction of movement fade into insignificance, allowing the reader to supply interpretation on the basis of prejudice. Perhaps Kierkegaard is playing with conventional notions of seduction, and would have been amused that his readers have so frequently grasped his real intention in reverse. After supplying a reading that finds the coachman heading home, away from Cordelia, I will suggest that neither the conventional reading nor this alternative reading can support an evaluation of the *Diary* as a repository of deep psychological insights.

Kierkegaard's *Diary* is often cited as his most provocative aesthetic work, and it has frequently been published separately from its original placement as the culminating segment of *Either/Or*, volume I. It is doubtful whether the diary makes sense apart from its original context, where it completes the dialectical movement from the original awakening of desire in the person of Don Juan, to the mastered ironies of Johannes the seducer, and also completes the movement from the endless cycles of feminine reflective grief given in the Shadowgraphs, to the aesthetic indifference attributed to Cordelia's final mastery of the relationship, at least as it is presented by A., the pseudonymous "editor" of the *Diary*. Johannes, the reflective seducer, and in contrast to Don Juan, repeatedly delays immediate gratification, distancing himself from the world through the rotation method, in an effort to conquer the desire awakened by a pretty woman, the ultimate threat to his ability to achieve a completely mastered ironic relationship to reality. In this context, Jo-

hannes can hardly be considered to be after the same thing that Don Juan was, as though the rotation method had slowed him down, turning him into a ponderous rake. The dialectical movement within the aesthetic sphere would have no tension at all on such a reading. If Don Juan conquered 1,003, Johannes contrasts by hoping to conquer nothing but his own desire, but fairly and legitimately, *after* raising it to its highest pitch. If Cordelia applies normal, conventional canons of interpretation, she should consider Johannes, after the break, guiltless in the normal sense, her awakening memory convincing her that he was not a seducer of an ordinary kind. Johannes can conquer desire without involving or harming Cordelia, at least he thinks that he can if he plays his cards just right. If Johannes and Cordelia complete the development of the aesthetic stages for Johannes, their entrance into this resolution is not symmetrical. The diary belongs to Johannes, and it is he who hints that the aesthete can completely conceal an inner nature from public scrutiny, although the aesthete's exterior will automatically receive a conventional, morally judgmental interpretation.

It is Johannes who arranges the seduction, but he conceives his activity in a manner that he thinks never results in forcing Cordelia to do anything against her will, except possibly at the end, where she must come to terms with the termination of their relationship (as she has conceived it). There is a suggestion throughout the diary, supported elsewhere by Kierkegaard's reflections on this theme, that true love can only be awakened by figures who simultaneously cause us unhappiness, so that love and unhappiness (or even despair) are a dialectical pair. We love our fathers and we love God because they have introduced the motif of unhappiness into our lives while and by loving us, allowing recognition of inner despair to deepen as recognition of their love intensifies.

The seducer is out to awaken such a love in Cordelia, which requires that he be the first person to awaken significant inner despair in Cordelia. Cordelia must be presented without parents, and particularly without a father, so that Johannes can initiate his schemes, and in fact this is part of the structure of the story. Cordelia is being raised by a female relative. The seducer loves Cordelia as god (the father) loves, permitting free choice to the loved one, while utilizing superior knowledge of what will be freely chosen to orchestrate the sequence of events. Kierkegaard, who lies behind the layers of pseudonymity involved, is out to seduce us mentally in the same way, bringing us to religious reflection for our own good, but manipulating us through indirect communication, and never attempting to coerce us through assertions of authority. Is this what the repeated assertions that Johannes is not a seducer in the ordinary sense amount to, that he is out to guide Cordelia for her own good, to bring her into a stage of religious rapture? Many readers have noticed that the absence of explicit sexual reference allows one too easily to assume that Johannes retains complete integrity with respect to his interpretation of the engagement, shifting responsibility for any conventional misunder-

standing onto Cordelia. But there are many problems with this exculpating attribution of motive and exonerating interpretation of conduct. Johannes presents himself as a figure whose break with Cordelia can be legitimated on the grounds that he breaks no explicit promises. It is clear that this is from Johannes' point of view, since from Cordelia's, an engagement might normally be considered to involve at least an implicit promise. Cordelia's conception of the engagement and the seducer's conception turn out to be different, and if no promise in the seducer's conception is broken, he is surely harsh and judgmental when it seems to turn out that Cordelia does not share his conception. In assuming that the constructural position of the diary in volume I of *Either/Or* dismisses any overt carnal interpretation, and overlooking (for the moment) the arrogant coercion implied by Johannes' selection of Cordelia for his project, there remains the question whether an exculpating interpretation of Johannes can consistently be carried through.

The diary opens with a slow sequence of events. Johannes spots a young girl that he finds initially attractive, and through a series of speculations and strategies, manages to meet her, becoming impressed in the process with her isolation from the world around her. He notes that the smile on her face suggests this isolation, by indicating in the situation that idle chatter bores her. The seducer supposes that her femininity might become reflective, and wonders whether he dares "tense the bow". (Who's bow?) There's no doubt that the seducer is in charge, as he sees it, manipulating Cordelia in his search to discover if she could be the perfect feminine companion. Having accepted the Biblical notion that Cordelia might be his helpmate, the seducer steps up his investigation. He attempts to manipulate Edward, who's in love with Cordelia, using a manufactured friendship with Edward to be close to Cordelia. He accompanies Edward to the house of Cordelia's aunt, overtly seeking the company of the aunt. Johannes chats with Cordelia's aunt, but it is intended that Cordelia should overhear these conversations. Some of this is quite humorous by conventional standards, but Johannes can hardly be said to have the good of Edward or of the aunt in view, confirming the self-centered nature of his operation. The utilization of Edward culminates when the seducer suddenly proposes to Cordelia, is accepted on Cordelia's behalf by the aunt, and then is accepted by Cordelia herself. The story proper now begins. An engagement is acceptable to the aesthete Johannes, but marriage has a suspect meaning from the start. Johannes is intent on *breaking* the conventional engagement to effect an even more beautiful and significant relationship with Cordelia.

The seducer's scheme has two movements. First, the conventional engagement must be cancelled because the seducer's concept of love is not compatible with its presuppositions. Neither the hovering aesthete nor the religious hero could willingly accept a relationship whose conventions interfered with freedom. Second, a double movement is planned after the break of the engagement, the first a mock war in which he flees,

and she pursues, although this is his method of captivating her, forcing the awakening of her real love, and the second is one in which she pursues him, intending finally to capture him. In this second war, he must escape, finally escaping the last erotic fascination, that of women, permitting a solitude in which the world falls away, allowing God's quiet voice to be heard. The diary traces the seducer's frustration of Cordelia's awakening love until she breaks the engagement, and then traces the movement until the moment when he is able to escape her, as he had hoped when he laid his plans.

That the seducer constructs Cordelia to represent the attractions of women in general contrasts nicely with Don Juan's taking of women as individuals, and this surprising deflection of ordinary seduction is well motivated by looking at textual details. At one point, for example, the seducer is said to operate on the theory that one should always have an extra line out. *A.*, the editor, notes an ambiguity in this phrase, and explains that he changed his mind as to what the seducer had in mind by it. The perhaps obvious interpretation is that the various sketches of other women in the diary show that the seducer is always on the alert for other possibilities of seduction, even though his pursuit of Cordelia takes up all of his time. These sketches keep the seducer's erotic credentials intact, but unlike the case of Don Juan, the seducer's immediacies are put to another purpose – to reflect on the aesthetic life so as to intensify detachment from the external world.

Kierkegaard's device for reflection is always to locate a concept in an individual, so that it can be studied in a concrete instance, and his pseudonyms represent precisely such instantiated ideal types. If Socrates represents world historical irony, Cordelia here represents the persistent threat to an aesthete's detachment, and the seducer is the instantiated threatened aesthete. The seducer struggles with seduction, the final sharpened concept of desire linking him to the world, and Cordelia is the attractive representation of disturbing externality. At the end of the diary, the seducer goes to Cordelia as to a symbol, and after explicitly reflecting on women in general. The occasional sketches of other women actually use the women who are sketched to temporarily restore the immediacy of Cordelia's charms for the aesthete, who is always impelled towards boredom. These women are explicitly said to "create a mood" that is transferred to Cordelia, rejuvenating Cordelia as the temptress. This fantasy life works against the seducer's detachment, as though he imagines Cordelia to be the sum of all immediate feminine charms. Being with the actual Cordelia threatens boredom, since she could always be reflected away by an ironic rotation on her concreteness, perhaps by concentration on some small physical detail of her appearance. In short, the seducer has two lines out. One line is for Cordelia as the phenomenon most disturbing to aesthetic detachment, and the other for the concept of aesthetic detachment itself. The concept can be instantiated in the person of the seducer only if Cordelia's threat can be cancelled. Cordelia is

only of instrumental interest to the mind of the seducer. She is never regarded as Cordelia in the seducer's plans.

The diary is often said to be a masterpiece of psychological analysis, bristling with insights into the feminine mind. It should be clear at this point in time who it is that might make such judgements. Kierkegaard does spend much of his authorship discussing relationships between men and women, which are obviously troubling for Kierkegaard's anticipations of the religious stage of existence. Roughly, Kierkegaard wants to say that men and women stand equally before God in the religious stage, but also that God created them differently, and that the differences between them make a difference at both the aesthetic and ethical stages of existence. Women are open to salvation, but they were also created in reality after men, and as helpmates for them. Women are closer to nature, more enveloped in finitude, and certainly not as dialectical in thought as men. This Kierkegaard develops from the Biblical accounts, although it is clear that his surety can only fit a context of nineteenth century hermeneutical presuppositions. What Kierkegaard says about women in the diary is simply quite in step with nineteenth century, dominant, male, scholarly attitudes. There is no reason to think that the pseudonyms don't represent Kierkegaard fairly on this matter. If one would attempt to read the diary as an expression of mature disgust at earlier excesses, there is still the embarrassing fact that the pseudonyms are all male figures in Kierkegaard's corpus, and women are always only talked about by the pseudonymous figures.

The fame of the diary may even be attributed to the fact that it fits so comfortably into expressions of male omnipotence and omniscience fantasies over women. This might be thought to be intriguing for its expected academic readers. When Faust seduces Margaret, Faust's properties make identification difficult. The seducer is a more comfortable figure, one that academically trained readers might easily identify with. Johannes does not conquer by his ravishing good looks, by magical powers, or by being sympathetic and helpful; he acquires the woman of his choice through a web of intrigue in which she is resuced ultimately to helplessness by the seducer's persistence, and by his superior, but quite human, intelligence. The cover illustrations of some paperback editions of the diary have not failed to note these erotic possibilities of the text, and have portrayed a conventional eroticism that could not have been even remotely compatible with Kierkegaard's intent. The seducer traps Cordelia by playing God. Kierkegaard could not have consciously entertained this heterodox opinion of himself, but it's not too farfetched to suppose that the intensity of Kierkegaard's theological speculations might have surfaced in an oblique way in the pseudonymous authorship. A similar oblique fantasy may be at play in those readers who respond to conventional notions of success with respect to the seduction of Cordelia. Such readers will necessarily point Kierkegaard's carriage towards Cordelia at the end of the diary.

The narrative thread offered here depends on the notion that the seducer is able to break off the relationship with Cordelia just when she attempts to capture him by offering him everything. This is the culmination of the planned double movement of the seduction. Johannes' greatest fear would be that he couldn't break with her after creating just the situation in which they are bound to each other in the absence of prosaic convention. What happens on the night of September 24 at the end of the diary account? Most of the speculation concerning what kind of seduction Johannes had pursued guesses at the hypothetical events of this night. But Johannes has left almost no clues in the diary as to what exactly happened in the real world. One reading of these slender clues is to suppose that Johannes spends the night with Cordelia, anticipating the event in the diary entry of September 24, and remembering the event with pleasure in the entry of the next day. To imagine carnal fulfillment against the plan of the double movement, and against the web of complicated aesthetic intrigue and reflection that has preceded this night seems to ring false, unless the text compels that reading, and it does not. If Cordelia were to have offered herself to Johannes in the intended sense, and Johannes were to have accepted in that same sense, the spiritual union and joint rotation from the world that has been endlessly discussed in the context of the seducer's desire would be empty; the seducer would have deceived himself about what he was after. Kierkegaard's serious, spiritually oriented readers would also have been deceived. Even if Cordelia offers to do anything, and especially if she makes that offer, it is precisely in resisting the offer that Johannes can win the detachment from the world that he has been struggling for. The last paragraph in the entry dated September 24 permits a reading compatible with the expressly formulated intentions of Kierkegaard's authorship. The seducer's coachman appears just before midnight, but the question is whether the coachman drives the horses to a tryst with Cordelia, or away from what has just been a final break with Cordelia, so that the carriage is travelling to the lodgings of Johannes. On the following day, does Johannes note in his diary the consummation of his affair with Cordelia in sexual fulfillment, or does he reflect that he was able to break off his dependence on Cordelia's attractions at the maximum of their power? The details suggest that the seducer has spent the night alone, exhilarated by the fact that he has mastered the greatest threat to aesthetic detachment. This possibility is marked in the Danish text by a small dash, indicating an elapse of time *between* the onrushing confrontation with Cordelia, and the arrival of the coachman, an elapse of time in which the significant victory of the aesthete has already occurred. A correct interpretation of the events on the crucial night lies in this explicit gap in the text, a gap which commentators seem uniformly to have missed.

As Johannes approaches the meeting with Cordelia, he is beginning the second part of the double movement. He has stopped running from her; he must now escape her attack. Only the eternal is explicitly on his

mind, and he approaches the moment of the break as a concrete embodiment of the aesthete, hopefully representing the power of the rotation method to conceal the aesthetic interior. What goes right at the fateful meeting is that he can effect the break, even if he can't get Cordelia to break from the world with him, which would have allowed a resolution of the seduction in which Cordelia would not have been harmed, at least from an aesthetic point of view. Her letters, set out at the beginning of the diary, reveal her consequent anger, and make it clear who has effected decisive control. As Johannes awaits his coachman in the final entry, he may be anxious that his resolution may be undermined by her continuing proximity, or cancelled by a resurgence of the idea of her charms. The following morning, as the diary shows, he seems pleased with himself, pleased with the successful conclusion of his erotic plans. He has won, and Cordelia has lost. Cordelia was simply not able to break from the world of convention with him. The myth of shared love has been shattered, and the aesthete has learned the necessity of living alone. He will not listen to Cordelia's recriminations, and as the last paragraph indicates, his interest in future affairs has been reduced to the most idle aesthetic curiosity. Johannes is the perfect counterpoint to Don Juan, who would now be rushing off after another skirt. Not being able to act except by not acting is Johannes' triumph, his final break with exteriority, and the cold exteriority of his denial is the perfected aesthetic mask for the interior emotional turmoil that he has conquered. The seducer acts by failing to act, and hence terminates the necessity of future overt action. If Cordelia can understand this, she will not be able to read it from the external signs, which would indicate only that he doesn't love her, whereas in fact he will never love anyone else.

The seducer needs and uses Cordelia to effect his own escape from the constraints of desire. Cordelia turns out to be Johannes' unwitting helpmate. Why else would the seducer need a virgin ignorant of her father for his plans, a creature not yet knowing certain kinds of sin and not yet entrapped in certain earthly relationships? There is a chilling undertone of sacrifice here, the seducer willing to sacrifice Cordelia in the hopes that she will be given back to him again, quite parallel to the discussion of the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham that will be presented in *Fear and Trembling*. Even if there is no presentiment here of the religious test of faith, Cordelia's failure to escape convention has ominous overtones for the ability of women to leap to the religious, even if that had seemed a possibility to the seducer. Cordelia is abandoned to the world and to her own devices at the end of the diary, her passion dialectically raised, but still focussed on an unworthy object.

Strictly speaking, the diary stops just as the second motion of the double movement is terminated by the seducer's triumph over himself. The possibility that Cordelia might reflect herself out of immediacy, hinted at by A., is not followed up. In attempting to relate this to Kierkegaard's own life, the editor might be expressing a desire on Kierkegaard's

part that Regine might have been able to read the interior in spite of the indications of the exterior break, accompanying him out of conventional existence. Any such hopes in Kierkegaard's own life were shortly thereafter dashed by the announcement of Regine's new engagement. In the course of the diary, Cordelia's voice weakens and disappears. At the start, she speaks for herself in her letters, but at the end of the diary, the seducer is thinking only of himself. If he could do it out of love, the seducer would change Cordelia into a man, perhaps so that she would have the resources to avoid the suicide that she may have threatened as her only weapon against the seducer's unilateral disengagement. Reflecting this back into life, if Regine did not commit suicide, Kierkegaard may have failed to read signs of her interiority.

If we have the coachman finally heading in the right direction at the end of the diary's idealizations, why has it been so difficult for commentary to find this direction as the appropriate culmination of the double movement? The gap in the text allows hermeneutical bias to overcome the subtle code of the aesthete. Ordinary connotations of *seduction*, *engagement*, etc., ensconced in bourgeois convention, produce an ethical reading of what is meant to be an aesthetic revelation. Direct communication can't be succeed with a readership whose ears are tuned to the wrong modalities. What has passed for universality and depth in the diary is an aligned orientation of a predominantly male academic readership that has fallen into the aesthete's gap, literally without noticing. But the failure of innocence of the *Seducer's Diary* can be noticed, and the carriage can be turned around exactly when the aesthetic intent of the author is exposed. Which author? It doesn't matter Kierkegaard scholarship would give all of the aesthetic pseudonymous authors a good laugh, and it would also provide humor for the religious pseudonymous authors. Such are the ways of the world.