Kierkegaard as Psychologist

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Melancholia and the Religious: Beyond Repetitions

In the Middle Ages a person saved his soul by telling his beads a certain number of times; if in a similar manner I could save my soul by repeating to myself the story of my sufferings, I would have been saved a long time ago.

—“Quidam’s Diary”: Midnight, 14 June

The reader who has read Constantin Constantius’s little book will see that I have a certain resemblance to that author but nonetheless am very different.

—Frater Taciturnus’s “Letter to the Reader"

When a writer keeps repeating a story line, can he eventually convince the reader—or perhaps himself—that things had to develop in the way that they did? This is the almost inescapable question that emerges in contemplating the many variations of doomed engagement in Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous writings.

In “‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’” Søren Kierkegaard pseudonymously once again recounts an unhappy love story just as he did in major portions of Either/Or, part 1, and Repetition. But in this work there are distinctive differences, despite striking similarities. In this large section of Stages on Life’s Way (1845) that is really a stand-alone novel, he expanded a theme begun at the end of Repetition, namely, crisis in normal human existence as religious potential emerges in the personality. This particular crisis is that of a character blocked by enclosing reserve from normal human fulfillment in a conventional love relationship. The sweet melancholy of Repetition’s young man has now become a gloomy melancholia. However, while the story suggests that a combination of a dawning spiritual interest and enclosing reserve are the joint causes for the failed romance, there is really no reason for the reader to think that there is any
necessary connection at all between enclosing reserve and the spiritual and religious. This story’s suffering is in great part self-inflicted and also totally unnecessary to the fulfilling of a felt religious destiny, despite the narrator Frater Taciturnus’s insistence to the contrary. But we will have to wade through a sea of repetitions to establish this point.

Kierkegaard appears in this work still to be extricating himself from his ill-considered engagement to Regine Olsen in 1841, in the same kind of repetition compulsion suggested in chapter 6. Kierkegaard’s ongoing emotional problems of the time may affect the fact and the composition of “Quidam’s Diary,” but Kierkegaard’s private life is not what the work is formally or ultimately about. Instead, it is about beginning to understand the religious dimension of the personality as revealed in a conflict between aesthetic and ethical categories, especially the clash between a romantic notion of elusive perfect love and the sober idea of a universal duty to marry. Many readers of Kierkegaard are so struck by the repeated love story that they mistakenly believe that Kierkegaard remained obsessed with it throughout the remainder of his short life. Despite continued exploration of the repeated love tale in the pages to follow, it cannot be emphasized enough that Kierkegaard, at least theoretically and theologially, did indeed reconcile earthly love and the religious by the time that he published *Works of Love* in 1847.¹

Not only do the similarities and parallels between the 1843 novella and the 1845 novel provide further evidence of a literary repetition compulsion on the part of Søren Kierkegaard, but also Quidam himself seems to have some sense of this.² If indeed “‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’” is something of a literary repetition compulsion, one may question whether Kierkegaard really enjoys the sovereign control over his pseudonyms and the direction of the authorship that his 1848 composition *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* would suggest. For example, does his unconvincing theory of a religious crisis and development inextricably linked to enclosing reserve not ultimately work against him (viz., portraying the dynamism of the emerging religious) as it draws the reader’s attention back to the pathos of the love affair itself? The repeated insistence that the religious has made normal human love impossible repeatedly fails to persuade. But while Kierkegaard’s personal life seems to intrude into the text, in the end, his personal problems do not block his creative transformation of experience or negate the more important meaning that the work seeks to impart. In sum, if his tactic of retelling a love story in order to call attention to the religious does not work to explain away his or similar conduct, that does not per se invalidate his theory of religiously directed melancholia (*Tungsind*) and personal crisis sparking deeper religious subjectivity.
The problem in Kierkegaard’s presentation arises when Taciturnus adds enclosing reserve as an essential element in the link of melancholia [Tungsind] with the religious, suggesting that inescapable isolation and the inability to sustain an earthly love form a unit with the religious. His insistence on linking enclosing reserve to the religious never amounts to a formal argument, and it can even lead the reader (and especially one familiar with previous versions of the love story) to suspect that the religious is being invoked as a dramatic, (self-)justifying cover for an isolating and debilitating personal reserve that is totally independent of the religious. Quidam would have us accept his retelling of the story as a (romantic) embrace of a once-and-still beloved, through the medium of recollection. Thus, religious impulse and love both survive in some form, and there is some kind of reconciliation after all—but only in the pseudonymous speaker’s mind! Indeed, this line of interpretation would bring us back to the aesthetic categories of Repetition or even to the young man (Aesthete A) of Either/Or, part 1. But Quidam is beyond the sweet, idle melancholy of that young man and well into the religious crisis that Constantin foretold for the young man of Repetition. In his brooding melancholia, Quidam attempts to justify himself to himself (guilty?/not guilty?). His answer does not satisfy himself after all, and the answer should not satisfy us. Nonetheless, it contains insights into his predicament and complex psychology.

Overview of the Diary

“‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’” purports to be an anonymous diary fished out of Søborg Lake by Frater Taciturnus, stitched together by Hilarius Bookbinder along with the other manuscripts that constitute Stages on Life’s Way, and then brought to the public. Its purported publication history is a tale of literary and psychological distancing, from Frater Taciturnus, who is not quiet, from Hilarius, who does not laugh, and from Søren Kierkegaard, who is more than a little severe (Severinus) with the central character.3 It is a noisy narrative of “Someone’s” (Quidam) self-torment, vacillating between self-accusation and self-justification, a tale of gloom and foreboding. Not a happy business at all. While not the best of Kierkegaard’s literary works, it has moments of literary sparkle and psychological brilliance.4

“‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’” constitutes almost two-thirds of the mass of Stages on Life’s Way.5 Within “‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’” the morning and midnight diary entries (“Quidam’s Diary”) form two-thirds of the novel,
with the remaining portion being a nearly hundred-page-long letter to the reader. The morning and midnight diary entries are placed in a kind of counterpoint. As in musical counterpoint, the whole can be less interesting when reduced to its parts: when the upper and lower “lines” are played separately. Nonetheless, the experiment is worth making. For the separate morning and midnight diaries, now intertwined, are supposed to report different years and different stages in the intensification of religious crisis. The morning entries actually stand alone quite well as a separate composition. In contrast, the midnight entries, read alone, are unrelieved gloom and a tune that one would soon tire of. The ending section, Frater Taciturnus’s long “Letter to the Reader,” is reminiscent of the long-winded letters of Judge William in Either/Or, part 2.

“‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’” is more than a recapitulation of the psychology of Repetition. It is a clear, deliberate advance beyond it and the psychology of Either/Or as well. The differences, even expressed in parallels, point to this.

“‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’” could at first glance seem to be a diary reworking of Repetition, with the emotionally distant Quidam now as subject and author, overheard by the “Silent Brother” (Frater Taciturnus), who is a more stable (“constant”) listener than Constantin and does not intrude himself constantly into the story. But it is not. For between them there is no relationship (of confiding, fleeing, reconciliation) such as characterizes the almost clinical relationship of “analyst” Constantin and “patient” young man in Repetition. The Latinate Quidam writes only to himself about the unnamed Quaedam (feminine Someone). If one takes the epistolary novella Repetition and the diary-novel “‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’” as mirrored images of the love story, the latter must be regarded as “through a glass darkly,” and this is nowhere more darkly reflected than in the term Tungsind (melancholia) that characterizes the latter work, in contrast to the Melancholi (melancholy) that marks Repetition. To rejoin the music metaphor, if Repetition is the love story in the key of Melancholi, “‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’” is the love story in the key of Tungsind.

Linkages abound. The title for “‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’” comes from Repetition itself, where the October 11 letter of the young man asks, “How did it happen that I became guilty? Or am I not guilty?” (SKS, 4:68; R, 200.) What was only a rhetorical question in the novella has become the haunting question of the novel. The subtitles of both works are also close: “A Venture in Experimenting Psychology” (Repetition) and “A Psychological Experiment” (“‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’”).

The pronoun “I” is “overused” in both books and is excessive even by letter and diary standards. In fact, Repetition and Stages on Life’s Way are literally the most egocentric books in the aesthetic body, even though neither “I” is ever named. (“Young man” and “Quidam” are as close as we
get, the latter, as has been observed, only an indefinite pronoun.) Each young man’s entries are for a seven-month period (August to February in *Repetition*, January to July in “‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’”). Constantin tells the story of a young man’s engagement a year before; the morning diary tells of Quidam’s engagement a year previous. Both works end with concluding letters by the editor, who meantime has tried to reduce the engagement chronicler to a fiction. *Repetition* is ambiguous about whether the young man is ultimately a fiction, whereas Frater Taciturnus’s “Letter” portrays Quidam as his literary product.

*Repetition* is about a love story still unfolding. We expect the past tense (since it too is the story of a year ago), but as it unfolds into the concluding pages (and beyond) of the book, we get the present. The morning diary of “‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’” is about the previous year. Where we expect a declared diary entry to be about that day (the meaning of “diary” after all), we get a “diary” of the past in the present tense. For the morning diary is really a recollection of events of a year ago and a discernment of their meaning a year later, on the day of the diary entry. The brooding midnight entries are about the enduring effects felt a year later.

Each book alludes to the religious character of the base problem of each young man. In *Repetition* it only begins to break through; in “‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’” it is the very starting point. For the “Diary” begins with the foreboding melancholiac (*tungsindig*) recognition that the religious is at the bottom of Quidam’s problems. *Repetition* was about *redintegratio in statum pristinum*, which is how it defines repetition. Taciturnus tells the reader at the end of “‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’” that he has Quidam expect everything to end in a *restitutio in integrum*, or restored self-unity (*SKS*, 6:401; *SLW*, 434), which is fairly synonymous.

In both works, Kierkegaard’s implied thesis is that a love wound shatters life lived in aesthetic categories only and, by degrees, necessitates confrontation with a higher possibility, namely, the religious. But whereas this message is announced in *Repetition*, it is boominly declared in “‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’”

Key differences emerge in the “Quidam’s Diary.” It is even more solipsistic than *Repetition*. For *Repetition* was at least addressed to another, and the relationship between the young man and Constantin provides some relief from the ever-present “I.” In the “Diary,” there is no such other. Neither the author nor the reader has any relief from the self-torturer who writes in the morning about today a year ago (in a misrelation to time?) and then at midnight about his state of mind that day, when the day is done. In the morning, he narrates his way out of a precipitous engagement a year ago, but as if it were today. At midnight, he stews over the aftermath a year later. This is a fuller and darker sketch of the divided self first sketched in *Either/Or*, part 1. The “Diary” is a kind of literary
schizophrenia. All of this only highlights the crisis—the vague, religious crisis—that has been heating up (since the “Diapsalmata”) and is now coming to a critical point.

**Morning Entries**

The morning diary purports to be the “reminiscence diary” of Quidam, written a year after the events narrated (although, with only one exception, in the present tense). In counterpoint to it is the much larger midnight diary, which is “really” today.

Thus the diary’s interlaced and confusing chronicle of unraveling romance and enduring aftereffects mirror the misrelation to time first presented in *Either/Or*, part 1. Technically, the morning and midnight diaries begin in year two, five months after the July rupture in year one. But, even the “one year ago” recollections of the morning diary are not the actual beginnings, for he admits to having seen her a full year before the morning-chronicled love pursuit took place, and perhaps that should be the true year one. By the time the diary ends, we cannot feel that the story is over. In fact, we might expect a sequel, in January of year three, that begins, “Two years ago . . .”! For the essential problem, whatever it is, is still unresolved, even if implosion seems imminent. As if to suggest this very point, the ending entry on July 7 predicts, “The third of January the unrest begins again” (*SKS*, 6:367; *SLW*, 396).

Meantime, the first entry, that of January 3 in year two, sets out the essential problem, both as it existed “then” (a year ago) and as it exists “today”: a young man of powerful religious sensitivity is afflicted by a melancholia (*Tungsind*) that is linked to his religious nature and the unspecified religious direction in which it impels him. It is a lonely, individualizing problem. Meantime he struggles with the more conventional universal-human possibility of marriage. The religious impulse and the romantic instinct are held to be in conflict: “Should a soldier stationed at the spiritual frontier marry? Does a soldier stationed at the frontier, spiritually understood, dare to marry—an outpost who battles, night and day . . . with the robber bands of a primordial [*Tungsind*]?” (*SKS*, 6:183; *SLW*, 195).

One does not need the midnight entries to see that the relationship is doomed from the beginning. But underlining the doomed quality of the relationship is the midnight entry of January 5 on quiet despair.

Quidam’s relationship to the young girl is a kind of macho romanticism that proves itself, in hindsight, to be inadequate.¹¹ She does not understand him, as he recognizes. This was the problem all along. He
sees that it makes a married relationship impossible. It never occurs to him that his problem with marriage might be the unrealistic romanticism that leads a young man to single out a young lady who is allowed to be nothing more than the projection of sweet love fancies. It never occurs to him that he is a victim of the unreal social ideas of his age concerning romantic love. The ideas of a bygone age might have been less dangerous. Had he had an arranged marriage, he might have done his duty and done very well. But in rejecting the nineteenth century’s self-deceiving idea of dreamy all-fulfilling love, he also rejects a young woman whose only guilt may be that she too is influenced by this idea. But now she is to become the occasion of self-growth for him (just as the young girl of *Repetition* played a parallel role in that work). We never come to know either young girl, and Quidam did not know her well either. For he declares that he will not stoop to know her by testing and investigating her nature (*SKS*, 6:194; *SLW*, 207)—although we are eventually told that her lack of religious presuppositions removes any basis for the relationship (January 25; *SKS*, 6:211; *SLW*, 226). He is *Tungsind*, and she is the symbol of joy (*Glæden*) (*SKS*, 6:185; *SLW*, 197).

The doomed engagement takes place on January 12 and immediately begins to unravel. He remarks paradoxically that their union is so new that they are separated by the nothing that they have in common, “Lovers ought to have no differences [Mellemværende] between them. Alas, alas, we have been united too briefly to have any differences. We have nothing between us, and yet we have a world between us, exactly a world” (*SKS*, 6:202; *SLW*, 216). By January 17, he has a presentiment that it will not work, that it is already over, and that it was over before it began: “It is not with her, it is not with Eros that I must struggle. It is religious crises that are gathering over me. My life view has become ambiguous” (*SKS*, 6:202; *SLW*, 216). By January, he has made his choice: “So I have chosen the religious” (*SKS*, 6:207; *SLW*, 222), and three days later he invokes her lack of religious presuppositions as justifying the break that is coming.

By February 12, he is reading religious books to her, even though he had earlier acknowledged that her lack of religious presuppositions could not be countered by his becoming her religion teacher. He notes that it is not working: she is not attentive. And, meantime, “I myself am growing more and more in the direction of the religious” (*SKS*, 6:224; *SLW*, 240).

When he acknowledges his enclosing reserve (*Indesluttethed*) and its being “an elemental flaw” (*SKS*, 6:225; *SLW*, 241), he comes closer to stating what is, for most, a more comprehensible grounds for his inability to sustain (or even form) a genuine relationship with the unfortunate young girl. Indeed, here he makes a telling self-disclosure about his enclosing reserve, whose very problem, he tells us ironically, is disclosure itself. He reveals that enclosing reserve cannot reveal itself and therefore
cannot form a union with another. The language of enclosing reserve is, expectably, self-referential. It does not really reach out to another. Hence it is monologue, not dialogue. And the reader should not take the diaries for free communication or dialogue. They were never intended for an audience, either by the fictional Quidam or his fictional creator Frater Taciturnus. Hilarius Bookbinder claims to have fished them out of a lake. For all the apparent self-disclosure in recognizing Indesluttethed as his problem, there is no hint of real self-transparency on Quidam’s part. In the end, his invocation of enclosing reserve is more elemental than he realizes. In it resides the fatal obstacle to love, for, as Haufniensis observed, enclosing reserve is demonic. It is the very opposite of marriage, which Judge William, in Either/Or, part 2, called the very symbol of ethical existence. Yes enclosing reserve and all that it represents (unfreedom, being locked up in oneself, unable to open to another) would seem to be Quidam’s real problem. However, Quidam has confused his inability to sustain a love relationship with the religious.

By February 20, he is acknowledging the misrelation, sees that she is unhappy, and asks her forgiveness for sweeping her into it. By February 28, he declares, “Courage and perseverance! I shall reach the religious with her” (SKS, 6:231; SLW, 248), but by which he means “by means of her,” not “along with her.”

By March 5, he observes that there are “no new symptoms” and repeats this in the next two entries, March 9 and 20. The entry of March 25 has the lovely, melancholy contrast of a young girl sixteen summers old and her young man, who is twenty-five winters old.

By April, the relationship is outwardly coming apart as well, and he reassures himself that the religious is the reason. On April 17 he writes, “The trouble is that she has no religious presuppositions at all” (SKS, 6:287; SLW, 309), but on April 10, he sums up the solitariness of his religious thinking when he writes, “Spiritually it is with an individuality as it is grammatically with a sentence: a sentence that consists only of a subject and a predicate is easier to construct” (SKS, 6:276; SLW, 297–98). One senses that his notion of predicates is limited to intransitive verbs, that is, verbs that have no object.

Whatever problems we may have with his solipsistic or narcissistic notion of the religious, he, for his part, sets it emphatically as the obstacle. April 24: “She has no sensitivity whatsoever to the motives I consider to be supreme” (SKS, 6:292; SLW, 314). April 26: “The deepest breathing of my spirit existence I cannot do without, I cannot sacrifice, because that is a contradiction, since without it I indeed am not. And she feels no need for this breathing” (SKS, 6:292; SLW, 315).

By May, there is open talk of rupture, and on May 8 he proposes breaking the engagement, a process that will consume the final two
months of entries as the diary shifts to a chronicle of dissolution in weekly installments.

On May 30 he explicitly links his enclosing reserve and his melancholia. It is repeated in the final morning entry of July 7: “My life view was that I would hide my [melancholia, Tungsind] in my enclosing reserve.” (SKS, 6:365; SLW, 394), that is, attempt never to share with anyone his darkening personal crisis pressing him toward a religious solution. This is nearer to the mark: enclosing reserve protecting the secret of his religiously directed melancholia.

Because he suffers from a combination of naïveté and the age’s idealization of romantic love, it never occurs to him his problem might be that he had courted the wrong person. His romantic notion of only one possible beloved combines with a pride that tells him that he cannot have gotten it wrong. And so, pace Frater Taciturnus, the reason he could not marry Quaedam may be nothing more than a simple mismatch of Quidam and his Quaedam. In short, he did not have the good luck of a Papageno with his Papagena in Either/Or, part 1. But Quidam would have us believe that the fundamental reason is the religious. Yet everything in his narration would suggest that his emotional isolation, expressed as Indesluttethed (enclosing reserve), is more nearly the reason and that the inability to disclose oneself as one needs to do in a love relationship has no necessary connection to the religious at all, even if the deep inwardness of religious life is not readily disclosed to another.

In the end, his enclosing reserve (which Walter Lowrie’s earlier English translation frequently rendered as “morbid reserve”) probably rules out any relationship at all and would do so even if there were no attendant religious crisis. Quidam makes a believable religious crisis into the unbelievable reason for the breakup.

In sum, enclosing reserve is the root problem in the relationship, not the religious and not even melancholia (Tungsind). Who was supposed to be persuaded by these repeated attempts to make the religious the justification for a failed human relationship? Quidam, his reader, or Kierkegaard himself?

**Midnight Entries**

Five months after the rupture, Quidam struggles with his oversensitive conscience in his midnight thoughts. If the midnight entries are considered as counterpoint to the morning reminiscences, they are for the most part the same repetitious, gloomy melody, broken only by six thematic, titled pieces (“Quiet Despair” [January 5]; “A Leper’s Self-
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Contemplation” [February 5]; “Solomon’s Dream” [March 5]; “A Possibility” [April 5]; “The Reading Lesson: Periander” [May 5]; “Nebuchadnezzar” [June 5]). The pattern of fifth-day midnight entries is one of the most striking structural elements of the diary.

The ghostly diarist worries about the young girl. He tells us that he goes to sleep at nine, to rise at midnight for his nocturnal brooding. “Who would not think me a fool if I told him that now in this current year she preoccupies me more than ever?” (SKS, 6:203; SLW, 217). According to him, he has her life on his conscience and feels like a murderer.

On February 2 he wonders whether he ever loved her, whether he might be too reflective (reserved) ever to love. But this instant of self-clarity vanishes as he asks himself why then all these sufferings and, as he seems ready to accept his suffering as the (romantic) proof that this must have been love, speculates that his tortured and haunted present must be the aftermath of a tragic love.

His repetition compulsion is clearly stated on March 7: “What is all this for? Why do I do it? Because I cannot do otherwise.” But at least to his conscious mind this is not mere Freudian repetition compulsion. He has a higher and conscious reason: “I do it for the sake of the idea, for the sake of meaning, for I cannot live without an idea; I cannot bear that my life should have no meaning at all. The nothing I am doing still does provide a little meaning” (SKS, 6:236; SLW, 253).

His belief that his religious nature is the root of his inability to have continued or consummated the relationship is repeatedly stated. He dismisses her, this year as last, for having no religious presuppositions (February 7; SKS, 6:220; SLW, 236). Yet he is ambivalent about this too and perhaps gives away the fact that her “nonreligious” nature is not the problem after all when he comments on April 29, “If she had become a religious individuality in the proper sense, it would have been frightful for me” (SKS, 6:296; SLW, 318). For then he would not have been able to use her lack of interest in the religious as a reason and he might have had to admit that his enclosing reserve alone was the cause. (The young girl never appears as a character in the novel. We see her only through Quidam’s eyes.)

On March 7, he remarks that “only a relationship with God is the true idealizing friendship” (SKS, 6:236; SLW, 253). But he confesses that, whatever a religious person may be, he himself is not yet one: “I am really no religious individuality; I am just a regular and perfectly constructed possibility of such a person” (March 20; SKS, 6:240; SLW, 257). He declares his enduring need to work himself free of her even a year later in order to turn to “the religious crises” that will then be his task (SKS, 6:243; SLW, 261). However incorrectly he may understand himself, he does have
a definite interpretation of his problem, and it is that his religious nature
and impending religious crisis, compounded by Quaedam’s lack of reli-
gious interest, make a continuation of the relationship impossible. But
this is an interpretation after the fact. We have no record of his thoughts
during the actual time of the rupture. (And we should not be fooled by
the morning reminiscence diary.) Everything is “clearer” in retrospect,
now that he has settled on a line of interpretation. Having done the in-
comprehensible deed of breaking off the relationship, he comments on
May 27, “Only religiously can I now become intelligible to myself before
God” (SKS, 6:326; SLW, 351). The rupture may intensify his emotional
state and his separate religious crisis, but the religious is not therefore
retroactively the cause. It is simple fallacious reasoning (Post hoc ergo prop-
ter hoc), and he must anticipate that his educated reader can see this.

He seems to come closest to self-transparency when he confesses,
“My idea was to structure my life ethically in my innermost being and to
conceal this inwardness in the form of deception. Now I am forced even
further back into myself; my life is religiously structured and is so far back
in inwardness that I have difficulty in making my way to actuality” (SKS,
6:327; SLW, 351).

Memories are never entirely to be trusted. Fictional recollections
should be no exception. And so we should be wary of Quidam’s recol-
lections of the past, upon which he has attempted to impose a narrative
structure and teleology: things not only happened, but they happened for
a reason and lead on to a conclusion that, in retrospect, is now obvious.
Quidam has perhaps convinced himself in his “Diary” and maybe Master
Kierkegaard as well. Who is Frater Taciturnus hoping to convince?

The reasons given for why the love story could not endure, however
many times Kierkegaard tells it, are ultimately more than unconvincing.
The story betrays itself, repeatedly and by its repetitions, as having no
rational justification for its outcome. If this has the effect of undercut-
ting the attempt to portray a religiously awakening Quidam as tragically
unable to marry a Quaedam and reduces it to the probable mismatch
of an undefined young girl who agreed to marry a man she hardly knew
but who turns out to be emotionally inaccessible, this does not render it
comic either, but only very human, both in its confused, irrational dyna-
mism and in the attempt to elevate it to something higher after the fact.¹⁵

But does the unpersuasiveness of Kierkegaard’s intended interpr-e-
tation of the love story necessarily undercut the meaning Kierkegaard
wants to give it? Not at all. For there is no reason to dispute the religious
sensibility and divine eros that drives Quidam, only his contention that
his brief but haunting romance was made impossible by the religious
rather than by his enclosing reserve. However, Quidam himself seems to
sense something of this, or else he would not be struggling with Frater Taciturnus’s title, “‘Guilty? ’/ ‘Not Guilty?’ ”

Even if we do not accept Quidam’s self-serving romantic analysis of his religious nature as precluding marriage, we should not pass over the more important point that he is clearly trying to make: that he is a religious individuality, struggling with his religious nature and its unclearly seen but definitely sensed directedness. In his “Letter to the Reader,” Frater Taciturnus will counsel studying him even in his excess: “Yet it may well have its importance to pay attention to him, because one is able to study the normal in the aberration” (SKS, 6:369; SLW, 398).

The Six “Short Articles”

The themes of the six midnight tales sketch enclosing reserve from various angles (despair, secret disease, secret sin, etc.) constitute a series of maudlin reflections.  

January 5 is the “voice of quiet despair,” about the son who recovers the lost intimacy he had with his now deceased father by imitating his father’s voice and saying to himself, as his father once said to him, “Poor child, you are in a quiet despair.” Ironically, listening to his father’s words is a source of comfort. But of course the voice is really his own—or perhaps an “impersonal,” higher voice that belongs to more than father and son. But it is anything but a message of comfort.

February 5 (“A Leper’s Self-Contemplation”) is a tale of solitude and self-mastery. The disoriented leper Simon calls to and answers himself, reproaching himself for having concocted a salve by which the mutilation of leprosy could be turned inward. But the leper renounces its use and therefore voluntarily suffers the fate of external mutilation.

March 5 (“Solomon’s Dream”) is the tale of a son discovering that the father is in despair (thus a kind of mirror image of January 5). A son steals a glimpse of his father’s secret despair, normally obscured by worldly success and esteem, and dreams that the worldly achievement is not God’s blessing of a chosen one but an ungodly man’s punishment sharply intensified—for both father and son—by the world’s misconstruing worldly station as indicating God’s favor.

April 5 (“A Possibility”) takes place in Christianshavn, then isolated from Copenhagen and accessed by a narrow bridge, a place where “one feels abandoned and imprisoned in the stillness that isolates.” It is the tale of a possibility that haunts and isolates, that renders mad and wise at the same time. The melancholy entry (SKS, 6:257–68; SLW, 276–288)
describes a strange, shy, rich, and mentally disordered young man who loves children and, in the secrecy of his apartment, collects sketches of children’s faces for reasons that will come to light when he recovers a (questionable) repressed memory of having been led to a whorehouse once by friends. Now he fears the possibility of having fathered a child, of having responsibility for the life of another. And so he examines the faces of urchins.

His elder cousin thoughtlessly comments about a man never knowing for sure how many children he has, and the young man shudders in recognition. When he gives alms to street children, he is tormented by the possible and horrifying irony of giving alms to his own unknown child. It is the tale of psychological self-tortment, of a sickbed fantasy coming back to haunt someone who is supposed to be in restored health.

May 5 (“The Reading Lesson: Periander”) tells of a schizophrenic monster personality, one who has slept with his mother, killed his wife, alienated and bullied his children, and inadvertently brought about the murder of his son. He is a revolting figure, a symbol of alienation and isolation. Only in plotting his own death, as escape from life, does he briefly negate the split in his being as he unites in one act his wise side and his tyrannical side. For concealing his true identity, he has the good sense to have himself assassinated and buried anonymously. But as part of the plot and to seal his anonymous burial, he has the assassins also killed.

June 5 (“Nebuchadnezzar”) is the tale of the king of Babylon changed in a dream into an ox for seven years. Defenseless against the power of God, alienated, and his true identity unrecognized by others, he cries out, “My thoughts terrified me, my thoughts in my mind, for my mouth was bound and no one could discern anything but a voice similar to an animal’s” (SKS, 6:335; SLW, 361).

The net effect of these entries is to underline the gloom of Quidam, who is haunted both day and night by memories and dreams, unable to live in the present, holding off a crisis that ultimately cannot be escaped and for which he pays dearly in the meantime in self-inflicted torment.

Frater Taciturnus’s “Letter”

The taciturn brother weighs in with a lengthy letter that makes no secret of his willful view of the story that he presents. For his “Letter” brings with it his own insistent interpretation of Quidam’s tale, not just about melancholia [Tungsind] directed toward the religious but also about the role of enclosing reserve. It was already implicit in “Quidam’s Diary”; in the
“Letter,” it becomes explicit. Taciturnus’s first tack is to portray the story as an unhappy love, doomed by misunderstanding between the two principals because the young man exists in (potential) religious categories, while the young woman lives solely in aesthetic categories (SKS, 6:389; SLW, 420). “Unhappy love implies that love is assumed and that there is a power that prevents it from expressing itself happily in the lovers’ union” (SKS, 6:375; SLW, 405). But what is this power? Frater Taciturnus will want to insist that it is his religious calling. The more skeptical reader will find that enclosing reserve is sufficient explanation. Taciturnus describes Quidam as “a demoniac character in the direction of the religious—that is, tending toward it” (SKS, 6:369; SLW, 398). In order to emphasize it, he makes the same point again but negatively when he informs the reader that the book is not about the erotic like Constantin Constantius’s tale in Repetition (SKS, 6:373; SLW, 402). For Repetition was about a collision within the aesthetic. “‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’” according to Taciturnus, depicts a collision between a young girl also within aesthetic categories and a darker young man who is “in the power of spirit in the direction of the religious” (SKS, 6:389; SLW, 420). There can be no mutual understanding, essential for a love union, since she cannot understand his deeper inner life. So argues Taciturnus.

To the extent that the issue is the religious, perhaps Taciturnus has not just Repetition in mind but the more famous book issued the same day, namely, Fear and Trembling. There Abraham is justified by virtue of the religious. However, the religious inwardness of Abraham is depicted there as merely incommunicable. (It does not make his marriage to Sarah impossible, although it does of course present difficulties.) Taciturnus replaces the merely incommunicable with the more problematical category of enclosing reserve.

For Taciturnus, Quidam’s Tungsind is nothing less than “the crisis prior to the religious” (SKS, 6:398; SLW, 430), as he attempts to suggest a necessary link between enclosing reserve and Tungsind.¹⁷ He comments that enclosing reserve is a form of Tungsind and that Tungsind is “the condensed possibility that must be experienced through a crisis in order that he can become clear to himself in the religious” (SKS, 6:396; SLW, 427). In sum: a crisis must be experienced in movement toward the religious, Tungsind is that crisis, and enclosing reserve is an aspect of Tungsind. But is it a necessary and universal quality of Tungsind? Otherwise put: must every individual facing his religious potential in a crisis of gloomy melancholia (Tungsind) also struggle with enclosing reserve? If one accepts this unqualified linkage, then Quidam’s moral quandary and emotional-psychological impediment may be absolved by being linked to the religious. However, while the link of Tungsind and the religious holds, the
suggestion of a universal link of enclosing reserve and the religious seems unnecessary, even if enclosing reserve seems to be a genuine personal problem of one individual, namely Quidam. Enclosing reserve is simply a separate problem from the religious, even if it should prove to be a possible symptom sometimes accompanying the brooding melancholia of Tungsind.

In his commentary, Taciturnus goes on to state that Quidam’s reserve is the “condensed anticipation of the religious subjectivity” (SKS, 6:396; SLW, 428). This might allow for the possibility that, once the religious crisis is over and religious subjectivity achieved (if achieved), Quidam might be able to come out of his reserve. But nowhere does Taciturnus suggest anything of the kind. And, in fact, the character of Quidam would not hold out this hope either. Were we to imagine him as having completed and resolved his religious crisis, we cannot imagine him as outwardly changed. We can imagine only that he would remain as reserved as ever and have to find some new reason for his isolating reserve. Taciturnus’s psychological experiment never systematically explores enclosing reserve. And while Taciturnus maintains that “there is no real healing for him except religiously within himself” (SKS, 6:397; SLW, 428), he does not suggest that enclosing reserve is itself ever healed or overcome.

Taciturnus speaks of deception on the part of the young man in trying to exit from the relationship. Yet Taciturnus’s “Letter,” and the whole of “‘Guilty?'/‘Not Guilty?’” with it, is a kind of deception too: the claim that the religious can now account for the end of a romantic mismatch in a way that the melancholy aesthetic categories of Repetition could not. In the process, the linkage between darker melancholia, expressed in the word Tungsind, and a religious crisis is established as an important point in Kierkegaard’s developing religious psychology. But the invocation of the religious still leaves the secret of enclosing reserve intact. The interlacing of the religious, enclosing reserve, and unhappy love is a dramatic tangle. But it fails to convince those of subsequent times that things had to end as they did.

Kierkegaard’s various meditations on impeded or impossible earthly love suggest numerous questions about the object/Object of human desire. In the human desire for a beloved, is there really also some dawning revelation of a greater dynamic of desire? In the insufficiency of the object/s of human desire, is there also a pointer or a pointing toward a greater Object? If so, does the Object represent a spiritual oasis in the parched desert of desire, or only a spiritual mirage? Kierkegaard surely believes in the spiritual oasis, yet through his pseudonyms he conducts his readers through only a tour of earthly mirages.
Kierkegaard’s story of failed personal fulfillment—transformed into literature, told repeatedly in different modes, and claiming to point beyond itself—may be a compulsive attempt to justify himself for his irrational conduct in breaking a rashly conceived engagement. But it is also recollection of an older religious truth, triggered by this personal trauma and approached from different angles (“The Seducer’s Diary,” *Repetition*, *Fear and Trembling*, “‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’”) as the trauma is reenacted in literary variations. It is ultimately a revelation about the nature and telos of desire that sees beyond itself and its initial object.

*Works of Love*, published under his own name in 1847, makes clear that Kierkegaard recognized that love of the other is at the center of the Christian message and of the religious life, Christianly understood. Yet the force of his fixation in the aesthetic writings is to make us wonder whether or not he ever successfully reconciled the two in his own life, or whether the enclosing reserve remained a personal emotional obstacle in moving from the *theory* of religious living to *practice* in Christianity.