CHAPTER 1

Existential Melancholia
The Affective Psychology of the "Diapsalmata" in Either/Or

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> I dwell in Possibility –
> A fairer House than Prose –
> More numerous of Windows –
> Superior for Doors
>
> Emily Dickinson[1]

> We violent ones, we finally endure.
> But *when* – that is, in which of all our lives,
> can we at last be open and receptive?
>
> Rainer Maria Rilke[2]

Let us begin with a standard interpretation that we think is largely accurate, although also incomplete. The aesthete, named only as A, continually laments the lack of meaning in his life. He suffers through fleeting passions that flare up and then die away, leaving him in a melancholic state. Although he longs for powerful emotions and opportunities for heroic action, he feels like a chess piece that cannot be moved.[3] As sensitive as he is, A nonetheless seems condemned to momentary affective impressions that, whether shallow or profound, fail to make any lasting impact on him – as will be noted by Judge William.[4] A's life is "a life adrift," without the underlying cares "that make integrity possible and life worth living,"[5] perhaps even "amoral and nihilistic," as he entertains countless possibilities but does not actualize any of them.[6] If he could remain enthusiastic about what moves him, and develop the kind of abiding commitments and concerns that would give his life coherence, he could form a stable identity, experiencing the world as a realm of tangible meaning. As it is, A lacks grounding projects; he is not a strong evaluator with specific roles and responsibilities. Rather than being at home in the world, he is a stranger and an alien who may "swoop down

[1] Dickinson (1960), p. 327. [2] Rilke (2007), p. 63. [3] EO 1, 22/SKS 2, 30.
[4] EO 2, 196/SKS 3, 189. [5] Mooney (1996), pp. 67–73. [6] Carlisle (2006), p. 59.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009067713.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

into actuality"[7] but does not remain there. Hence, he finds that his life makes no sense. "The only thing I see is emptiness, the only thing I live on is emptiness, the only thing I move in is emptiness."[8]

Becoming involved wholeheartedly would allow the aesthete to exist in a narrative instead of a series of lyric poems. Every moment could then be located in a wider span of time, which contains the projects and relationships that he cares about most and that therefore seem *real* to him. A could become a self in a more robust sense, defining his identity by forming and maintaining passionate commitments.[9] Then he would feel "a sense of meaning and also the weight of a responsibility that cannot be sophistically argued away"[10] by virtue of his dedication to what he loves and cares about. He would no longer float in possibility, experiencing the unbearable lightness of being "destined to have to suffer through [*gjennemlide*] all possible moods."[11] So why is it that he avoids becoming consistently engaged in the world and remains trapped within his alienated melancholia? We believe that this question cannot be adequately answered merely in terms of the aesthete's weakness of will, failure to listen to reason, or sheer obstinacy. There is more to be said on behalf of his viewpoint.

Indeed, the first voice we hear in *Either/Or* praising the kind of enthusiasm that can endure, a faithfulness that could withstand every ordeal, is not that of Judge William, but of A himself.[12] It is uncharitable of the Judge to blame the aesthete for his moods, including his depression, implying that he just needs to grow up. We ought to consider whether, when A is suffering from melancholy, or sensing that (his) life is meaningless, this is only his own fault. Yes, becoming a self means limiting oneself, and this is evidently something A cannot or will not do. Yet might there be reasons to maintain a more lyrical way of being? We shall explore why Kierkegaard's aesthete opts to retain his habits of being melancholic and alienated, despite the painful suffering and moral shortcomings that accompany this way of life. Nowhere is his fragmentary mode of existence more vividly on display than in the set of texts entitled "Diapsalmata," which constitute his introduction to us as readers: Thus, our attention will be focused mainly on this part of *Either/Or*.

The structure of our chapter is as follows. In the first section, we offer a general account of melancholy. We argue that melancholia is an existential condition that demands to be understood in terms of the metaphysics of

[7] EO 1, 42/SKS 2, 51. [8] EO 1, 37/SKS 2, 46.
[9] See, for example, Sløk (1983), p. 65. Cf. Rudd (2012), pp. 70–77, 168–172.
[10] EO 2, 66/SKS 3, 71. [11] EO 1, 31/SKS 2, 40. [12] EO 1, 37/SKS 2, 46.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009067713.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

possibility. What is characteristic of this existential condition, the mood of melancholia, is that it combines an infinite awareness of possibility with a painful awareness of the compromises we inevitably make with the world, others, and ourselves when actualizing possibilities. The aesthete's choice of a lyrical mode of being is based on his insatiable demand for receptivity and openness, the price of which is his painful sense of futility. This explains why he is nostalgic for a mythologized past and apprehensive of the dreadful future. In the chapter's second section, we take a closer look at the aesthete's relationship to the world and show how the dialectic of infinite possibility and impossible infinity is mirrored in his relationship to the world of objects, ideas, and fellow human beings. The aesthete's relationship to the world fluctuates between detached apathy and intense passion; on the social level, his alienation and loneliness are complemented by a deep sympathy for *the others* of society. Yet his self-description as incapable of action or expression is in conflict with the very fact of his literary productivity, as is exemplified by the "Diapsalmata" themselves. This is the theme to which we turn in the third and final section.

Each of the sections accordingly takes up one or more key elements of the classical discourse on melancholy: the first that of fear and sadness without cause; the second those of idleness, boredom, and loneliness (or solitude); and the third that of genius and creative energy.[13] In our chapter, we thus engage not only in the discussion on what has been called "melancholic epistemology"[14] – the question of whether melancholia can be epistemically justified – but also in "melancholic aesthetics" – the question of how melancholia attunes us to certain aspects of the world and human existence as such – and "melancholic ethics." While not qualifying as ethical in *Either/Or*'s technical sense, the melancholic life has moral worth on its own terms, floating free of constraint as it does.

Existential Melancholia

The Mood of Melancholia

A recurring theme in the aesthete's writings is his infinite demand for openness and receptivity. What characterizes his mode of being is that he asks for *everything*:

> *Aladdin* is so very refreshing because this piece has the audacity of the child, of the genius, in the wildest wishes. Indeed, how many are there in our day

[13] See Radden (2000), esp. pp. 5–19. [14] See, for example, Graham (1990).

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009067713.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> who truly dare to wish, dare to desire, dare to address nature neither with a polite child's *bitte, bitte* [please, please] nor with the raging frenzy of one damned? . . . Or do we not all stand like Noureddin, bowing and scraping, worrying about asking too much?[15]

At first sight, asking for everything may seem excessive, like a child who has not yet learned to be realistic in its demands. The aesthete, however, reminds us that the contrary might be the case. Learning to content oneself with little, and constantly worrying about keeping one's desires appropriately in check, might also be problematic. Severe modesty in one's desires could prevent one from achieving what may have been possible otherwise, and constant doubt about their appropriateness might impair one's capacity to realize goals of any kind. "What am I good for? For nothing or for anything whatever. It is a rare ability; I wonder if it will be appreciated in life?"[16] No particular thing will satisfy A, who insists on either all or nothing.

This attitude, however, comes at a price, namely that of the aesthete's painful awareness that reality fails to offer what he is asking for. "It is said that our Lord satisfies the stomach before the eyes. That is not what I find: my eyes are surfeited and bored with everything, and yet I hunger."[17] The failure to meet his insatiable demands is not a contingent feature of what his surroundings have to offer the aesthete; rather, it reflects the finite nature of reality itself. The aesthete anticipates not only the fleetingness of every enjoyment – "There are, as is known, insects that die in the moment of fertilization. So it is with all joy: life's highest, most splendid moment of enjoyment is accompanied by death"[18] – but also the "miseries and sorrows"[19] that life inevitably will bring, along with the apparent meaninglessness that threatens a mortal existence as such. So A asks himself why at a funeral everyone else should not just follow the deceased into the grave and be done with it.[20]

But it is not only *finitude* that dooms the aesthete's longings to remain unfulfilled; it is also the world's *unresponsiveness* to our demands:

> In my early years, when I went to a restaurant, I would say to the waiter: A good cut, a very good cut, from the loin, and not too fat. Perhaps the waiter would scarcely hear what I said. Perhaps it was even less likely that he would heed it, and still less that my voice would penetrate into the kitchen, influence the chef – and even if all this happened, there perhaps was not a good cut in the whole roast. Now I never shout anymore.[21]

[15] EO 1, 22/SKS 2, 30. [16] EO 1, 26/SKS 2, 35. [17] EO 1, 25/SKS 2, 34.
[18] EO 1, 20/SKS 2, 28. [19] EO 1, 22/SKS 2, 30. [20] EO 1, 29/SKS 2, 38.
[21] EO 1, 33/SKS 2, 42.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009067713.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This unresponsiveness includes our fellow human beings who, immersed in their own sorrows, fail to listen to what we have to say, and the world at large that is indifferent to our fate. "I have only one friend, and that is echo.. . . I have only one confidant, and that is the silence of night."[22] The aesthete's sense of the world's unresponsiveness is complemented by his awareness of the violence that we inevitably do to ourselves and others through possibilities we *do* actualize, because we fall short of meeting their (as well as our own) infinite demands.[23]

In terms of contemporary philosophy of emotions, the aesthete's melancholia can be described as a mood or an existential feeling.[24] Whereas emotions are bound to the specific situation we are in – they evaluate an object, event, or state of affairs in terms of what we care about – moods more profoundly refer to our situation *as such* and, in doing so, constitute and limit spaces of possibilities. The aesthete's insatiable demand for infinity and his sense of inevitable failure are not transient affective states of mind; rather, they describe his form of being in the world. Melancholia, therefore, is not one affective state of the aesthete among others; it is an affective orientation *toward* the world that shapes and infuses all his encounters *within* the world and delimits which kinds of encounters (feelings, cognitions, actions) seem available to him and which are felt to be impossible.

We are now in a position to give our first, preliminary answer to the question of why the aesthete chooses a lyrical mode of being despite the immense suffering and failure associated with this mode of being. The aesthete's state of melancholia is not simply a burden to him because his suffering, far from being a contingent side effect of his condition, is itself an expression of his heightened sensibility and capacity for experience. His heightened sensibility allows the aesthete to grasp specific aspects of reality that otherwise would remain unnoticed. Moreover, it also attunes him to a specific aspect of the human condition – and, especially, of the *modern* human condition – namely, our demand for infinity on the one hand and our finitude and fallibility on the other.[25] Thus, the aesthete's "choice" (as it were) to be and remain melancholic is grounded in his unquenchable

[22] EO 1, 33/SKS 2, 42–43.
[23] Regarding the infinitely demanding "face of the other," see Levinas (1985), pp. 85–88.
[24] On moods see, for example, Furtak (2018), pp. 159–197; on existential feelings, see Ratcliffe (2008), pp. 41–75.
[25] Cf. Ferguson (1995), pp. 3–6. See also Graham (1990), on the possible epistemic justification of melancholia, and Tietjen (2023), on the desires for the finite and infinite as two parts of the dialectic of human existence.

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longing. It is grounded in his wish to be true to the conditions of human life – even if this might prevent him from attaining more robust selfhood.[26]

Melancholia's Temporality

On the temporal level, the aesthete's melancholia expresses itself in nostalgia and anxiety. While nostalgia for youth – the mythological ideal of a self able to see enticing possibilities without a gnawing sense of futility – defines his relationship toward the past, anxiety as the anticipation of an indefinite yet certain doom characterizes his relationship toward the future.

"My soul has lost possibility. If I were to wish for something, I would wish not for wealth or power but for the passion of possibility, for the eye, eternally young, eternally ardent, that sees possibility everywhere."[27] Youth, it seems, is not simply an early phase of life but is linked with awareness of attractive possibilities and high aspirations. It is a dimension of human existence that is available to us at any age but one that can be lost.[28] A fears losing touch with his own youthfulness, as is indicated by his tone of melancholic nostalgia here:

> What a strange, sad mood came over me on seeing a poor wretch shuffling through the streets in a somewhat worn pale green coat flecked with yellow. I felt sorry for him, but nevertheless what affected me most was that the color of his coat so vividly reminded me of my childhood's first productions in the noble art of painting. This particular color was one of my favorite colors. Is it not sad that these color combinations, which I still think of with so much joy, are nowhere to be found in life.... If they are encountered occasionally, the meeting is always unfortunate, as this one is. It is always ... someone who feels alienated in life and whom the world will not acknowledge. And I, who always painted my heroes with this eternally unforgettable yellow-green tinge to their coats! Does this not happen with all the color combinations of childhood? The gleam that life had at that time gradually becomes too intense, too crude, for our dull eyes.[29]

Here, A describes how the color that, for his youthful self, represented heroic possibilities, now in the everyday world – the world of grown-ups bereft of heroic possibility – stands for madness, failure, and alienation. Whereas his youthful self could paint his heroes in what he saw as a heroic color, this "eternally unforgettable" light green, without caring about what

[26] It might also preclude him from being true to other, equally fundamental, aspects of human existence such as vitality, hope, and transcendence. On how these might be reconciled with melancholy, see Treanor (2021).

[27] EO 1, 41/SKS 2, 50. [28] Cf. Cavell (1990), pp. 51–52. [29] EO 1, 23/SKS 2, 31.

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others might think of them, his grown-up self holds on to his youthful self's vision, yet at the same time is painfully aware of society's callous disregard. In this sense, the aesthete can be described as alienated from and nostalgic for his youthful self who had not yet incorporated society's values and therefore was capable of feeling unalloyed joy and enthusiasm.

The aesthete's nostalgia expresses itself not only in his depictions of *his* youth or youth in general but also in his longing for past times; as is characteristic of nostalgia, individual biography and collective history are interwoven.[30]

> Most people complain that the world is so prosaic that things do not go in life as in the novel, where opportunity is always favorable. I complain that in life it is not as in the novel, where one has hardhearted fathers and nisses and trolls to battle, and enchanted princesses to free. What are all such adversaries together compared with the pale, bloodless, tenacious-of-life nocturnal forms with which I battle and to which I myself give life and existence.[31]

Like his praise of folk literature's "power to desire,"[32] this fragment reveals that – again, characteristic of nostalgia – what he longs for is not so much a real as a mythological time, one in which pure desire and uncompromised passion still seemed possible.[33]

While his relationship toward the past is characterized by nostalgia, his relationship toward the future is determined by anxiety. In one fragment describing how "heavy" [*tung*] his soul is, A voices a looming sense of danger, as if a natural disaster were approaching: "Over my inner being broods an oppressiveness, an anxiety, that forebodes an earthquake."[34] What is the object of this foreboding? It is something indeterminate but dreadful, whose imminent arrival feels certain. When he speaks elsewhere of being bound by a chain "of fearful presentiments, of inexplicable anxieties,"[35] we are alerted again to a looming but unknown danger. Noteworthy in these passages is that, in addition to experiencing a lack of enticing possibilities, the melancholy person is also liable to be haunted by an oppressive sense of doom.[36] To A the past for which he is nostalgic

[30] On personal and collective memory in nostalgia, see Boym (2001).

[31] EO 1, 23/SKS 2, 32.

[32] EO 1, 22/SKS 2, 31; see also EO 1, 28/SKS 2, 36.

[33] On nostalgia's dangers as well as its appeal see, for example, Solomon (2004), pp. 18–19. That it may provide an escape from the present is suggested by A in his essay on crop rotation (EO 1, 281–300/SKS 2, 271–289).

[34] EO 1, 29/SKS 2, 38.

[35] EO 1, 34/SKS 2, 43.

[36] This is similar to some manifestations of melancholia, as chronicled in Ratcliffe (2015), esp. pp. 194–196.

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seems alive with appealing possibilities that the present lacks, while the character of the future is vaguely threatening. This echoes what has been identified as a key feature of melancholic subjectivity, namely sadness and fear "without a cause."[37]

Yet what troubles the aesthete is not only that whatever happens – whatever we do – is bound to turn out badly, as it may seem in his "ecstatic discourse" with the synecdochic title *Either/Or*,[38] itself a *reductio ad absurdum* of taking any decisive action. There are additional reasons why, with deadpan seriousness, he predicts that any decision we make will lead to regret – not as a risk, but as an assured outcome.

> Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Whether you marry or you do not marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the stupidities of the world, and you will regret it; weep over them, and you will also regret it.. . . Whether you laugh at the stupidities of the world or weep over them, you will regret it either way.[39]

Stated in no uncertain terms, these two examples suggest that in deciding to make or not to make a major personal commitment or in adopting an overall attitude toward the world, we are fated invariably to feel regret. This emotion, unlike (say) guilt or remorse, need not involve a sense of having acted wrongly, for instance by making a poor decision: It is simply a feeling we have toward the fact that, at one point, things could have been otherwise.[40] It includes wistful longing for a time before now-foreclosed possibilities became unavailable – but this does not require that we favor those over the ones that *have* been actualized. Our regret has to do with the existential reality that we are finite, such that opting for an *either* excludes an *or*. If we seriously contemplate marriage but decide against it, we never get to discover how it would have been to marry the person in question. Nor, if we marry, do we learn how a spouseless life, or one in which we end up marrying someone else later, would have unfolded. Either way, we will be susceptible to regret – and the same is true for any consequential decision we make. Whatever actuality we choose, it will inevitably disappoint us – whereas, to put it bluntly, "possibility does not."[41] In realizing possibilities, we thus not only violate the world, others, and ourselves, we also violate possibility as such. To exist as a temporal being is inevitably to be dissatisfied, and this makes us long for a happiness that

37 See Burton (1979), pp. 46–48. 38 EO 1, 38–40/SKS 2, 47–49. 39 EO 1, 38/SKS 2, 47.
40 On regret see, for example, Roberts (2003), pp. 240–241. 41 EO 1, 41/SKS 2, 50.

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lacks nothing.[42] Yet that is what no finite happiness can be; so holding out hope for total satisfaction is, A recognizes, a false way of hoping. "I can describe hope so vividly that every hoping individual will recognize my description as his own; and yet it is [a] forgery,"[43] since what is ostensibly hoped for is not intended to be actually pursued. This is the price of safeguarding against regret.

Vexed by nostalgia for a mythologized past, the anxious apprehension of an indeterminate yet assured doom, and the anticipation of unavoidable regret, the aesthete lives "as one already dead,"[44] as nothing seems to remain in the present. Why "choose" such a mode of existing in time, which does not allow for any movement or development? First, his way of being in – or, rather, *out of* – time prevents the aesthete from inauthentic modes of existence; it allows him to laugh at the busyness of the businessmen, "busy bustlers" who, in their rush after pleasure, rush past it altogether.[45] As A himself observes, it is often "the melancholy who have the best sense of the comic"[46] because they avoid any compromise with mundane reality. Furthermore, the aesthete's atemporal mode of being, his refusal to take part in temporality, can itself in a certain sense be understood as a way of remaining eternal.[47] In some rare moments of aesthetic experience, "eternity" may even be given experientially to him, for example, when he hears the "immortal overture" of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.[48] So, while his refusal to compromise on the one hand prevents the aesthete from becoming seriously engaged with reality, it on the other hand prevents him from being compromised by reality and, in this regard, allows him to transcend finite temporality. Yet there is arguably a price to pay for this kind of timelessness. "The aesthete avoids true passion, he wants to remain free and he does not want this freedom to be threatened by getting involved."[49] As we shall see, this is why, in his relations with the world, A fluctuates between extreme passion and listless apathy, going through what has been appropriately called "a cacophony of moods."[50]

[42] Cf. Harries (2010), pp. 165–166. Or, as expressed by William Blake, "Less than All cannot satisfy Man", see Blake (2004), p. 76.
[43] EO 1, 36/SKS 2, 45. [44] EO 1, 42/SKS 2, 51.
[45] EO 1, 25/SKS 2, 33; cf. EO 1, 29/SKS 2, 37–8. [46] EO 1, 20/SKS 2, 28.
[47] On "*aeterno modo*" see EO 1, 39/SKS 2, 48. [48] EO 1, 30/SKS 2, 39.
[49] Harries (2010), pp. 97–98; cf. p. 21. See also Bergmann (1977), p. 45: "If the 'true self' is only the elusive, postulated point from which experience is viewed, then none of the shortcomings or failings of one's actual behavior ever qualify or taint this self. Nothing could ever force it to step down from the heights and it therefore remains godlike and immune."
[50] McCarthy (1978), p. 60.

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Me and the Other

Between Apathy and Passion

Kierkegaard's aesthete is not merely waxing nostalgic when he recalls his "first love" – "now I long only for my first longing"[51] – he is also exemplifying a characteristic trait, that of being passionate *about* passions that he would like to experience. "What I need is a voice as piercing as the glance of Lynceus, as terrifying as the groan of the giants," he laments: "That is what I need in order to breathe," to "have the viscera of both anger and sympathy shaken."[52] And yet he says:

> If I were offered all the glories of the world or all the torments of the world, one would move me no more than the other; I would not turn over to the other side either to attain or to avoid. I am dying death. And what could divert me? Well, if I managed to see a faithfulness that withstood every ordeal, an enthusiasm that endured everything, a faith that moved mountains; if I were to become aware of an idea that joined the finite and the infinite. But my soul's poisonous doubt consumes everything.[53]

By his own account, A has the power of doubting, but not of believing.[54] Notably, he speaks here of faith and enthusiasm as an observer, wishing to "see" them rather than to embody them himself. The attitude of would-be participants who transform themselves into spectators of life is elsewhere criticized by Kierkegaard, who adds that "there is always a connection between flashes of enthusiasm and prudential apathy."[55] Between his all-consuming doubt and his contemplative detachment from the emotions he longs to feel, the aesthete seems to be trapped in a predicament where his passionate upheavals can only be *about* the emotions he is *not* having. His disconnection from the world makes him incapable of being moved either to pursue or to avoid what seems good or bad at the moment.

Imagination, in Kierkegaard's view, is a sacred power that is meant "to bring people forcibly into actuality [*Virkeligheden*], into existence [*Tilværelsen*], to get them far enough out, or in, or down into existence." And once it has done so, "that is when actuality genuinely begins."[56] Yet this is not always what occurs, as the case of A illustrates. His romantic imagination overflows all boundaries and is compared to a vast desert or a wild heath; it grasps after something elusive, like a longing gaze into an

[51] EO 1, 42/SKS 2, 51. [52] EO 1, 24/SKS 2, 32. [53] EO 1, 37/SKS 2, 46.
[54] EO 1, 23/SKS 2, 32. [55] TA, 73/SKS 8, 70–1. [56] PJ, 595/SKS 25, 470.

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eternity.[57] The actual, which is used as a stimulus for flights of fancy, itself becomes remarkably boring as a consequence of the aesthete's imagination that is always caught up in taking flight away from it into the ether. What ensues from this outlook is that it becomes his "destiny to amuse himself," to avoid a boredom that knows no bounds: "Boredom rests upon the nothing that interlaces existence," as A writes in his "Rotation of Crops" essay, and "its dizziness is infinite, like that which comes from looking down into a bottomless abyss."[58] Boredom, one might say, becomes for him a "fundamental attunement."[59] He is capable not only of longing for his own longing but also of becoming bored by his own boredom: "How dreadful boredom is – how dreadfully boring; I know no stronger expression, no truer one, for like is recognized only by like.... I lie prostrate, inert; the only thing I see is emptiness, the only thing I live on is emptiness, the only thing I move in is emptiness."[60]

Disappointed by finitude, A also writes: "I have lost all my illusions. In vain do I seek to abandon myself in joy's infinitude; it cannot lift me, or, rather, I cannot lift myself.... My soul has lost possibility."[61] Joy, identified with the infinite (and thus with possibility), cannot lift him, he says – then, correcting himself, he professes that *he* may be to blame for not being uplifted. Is this fair, though? Is a lack of joy *just* a failure to uplift oneself, or to "cheer up?"

One virtue of the aesthete is that he recognizes such advice as insipid, even while being well aware that it is his outlook that needs to change if he is going to overcome his melancholia. For maybe he does not want to. "What if everything in the world were a misunderstanding; what if laughter really were weeping!"[62] Refusing to become well-adjusted to the world as it is may reveal strength of character rather than weakness. As the young man in *Repetition* writes, "How did I get involved in this big enterprise called actuality? Why *should* I be involved?"[63] Coming to terms with a role in a finite context requires closing oneself off to possibility, sacrificing the beautiful openness and receptivity that characterize the aesthetic mode of existence. It means falling in love exactly once, then forever holding one's peace. Yes, A is melancholic – but he may see the life of ethical commitment as one of quiet desperation, whose limited domain of possibilities would be even more depressing. He seeks to live in the

[57] See Furtak (2005), pp. 78–88. [58] EO 1, 291/SKS 2, 280.
[59] Cf. Heidegger (1995), pp. 80–105. On melancholia as preferable for A to a life of bourgeois commitment, see Kemp (2016), p. 14.
[60] EO 1, 37/SKS 2, 46. [61] EO 1, 41/SKS 2, 50. [62] EO 1, 21/SKS 2, 29.
[63] R, 200/SKS 4, 68–9. Our emphasis.

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instant and does not believe that this condemns him to remaining on the surface of things. As it seems to the aesthete, a momentary impression can have genuine depth: Consider the violin overture of *Don Giovanni*, the glimpse of a young girl walking alone to her confirmation, or even his own brooding anxiety.[64] In raising the question of whether life is worth living, A "is engaged in a more fundamental ethical inquiry than the Judge."[65] Clearly, he is capable of being profoundly and intensely moved.

Between Alienation and Sympathy

One specific expression of A's fluctuation between passion and apathy is his oscillation between social alienation and sympathy for others. While alienation and the corresponding feeling of loneliness is the mood dominating his way of being with others (as well as with himself, arguably), his unmistakable sympathy for the outcasts of society reveals that he is not merely contemptuous of others but also capable of being deeply affected by their fate. Even the "busy bustlers" are troubling to A: He feels sorry for *their* sake, because they have made themselves ridiculous.

The aesthete's social relationships are dominated by feelings of alienation. In contrast to the high demands he places on himself, most of his contemporaries are satisfied with achievements that are pathetically petty. He writes:

> When I became an adult, when I opened my eyes and saw actuality, then I started to laugh and have never stopped laughing since that time. I saw that the meaning of life was to make a living, its goal to become a councilor, that the rich delight of love was to acquire a well-to-do girl, that the blessedness of friendship was to help each other in financial difficulties, that wisdom was whatever the majority assumed it to be, that enthusiasm was to give a speech, that courage was to risk being fined ten dollars, that cordiality was to say "May it do you good" after a meal, that piety was to go to communion once a year. This I saw, and I laughed.[66]

Not only are these people's ideals deficient, but they seem incapable of even noticing the deficiency – the sheer paltriness – of the aspirations that guide them.

But A does not merely feel alienated from others whose values he does not share; he also feels misunderstood by them.[67] Although not explicitly

[64] EO 1, 21, 30, 34, 41–42/SKS 2, 29, 39, 43, 50.
[65] Carlsson (2019), pp. 136, 144. Cf. Carlsson (2021), p. 17.
[66] EO 1, 34/SKS 2, 43.
[67] EO 1, 19/SKS 2, 27.

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named as such, his fragments express a profound loneliness that reveals that he still desires to be understood and recognized, yet feels incapable of expressing himself in a way that allows others to understand him.[68] This is a key feature of existential loneliness: the impossibility of making oneself understandable to others is part of the existential feeling of loneliness itself.[69] The aesthete's loneliness expresses itself in deeply ambiguous forms, revealing that he both desires and fears other people's recognition. He repels other people with his dismissive attitude and still desires – or maybe even hopes – that they prove him to be wrong.[70] He laments his failure to express himself and complains about other people's incapacity to understand him and yet, in doing so, he does nonetheless succeed at bringing something to voice, and we his readers do, at least partially, understand him. He suffers from feelings of alienation and loneliness, yet he also seeks and embraces loneliness – or solitude – as the state that enables him to be and remain melancholic.[71]

The aesthete's feelings of alienation and loneliness are compounded by the fact that in some moments he is deeply moved by other people's fate, even if these moments remain rare. One such moment is the encounter with the man in the pale green coat (cited above); another is a glimpse of "a poor girl walking utterly alone to church to be confirmed," which "most painfully moved" him.[72] It is remarkable that, in both of these cases, it is strangers who evoke sympathetic feelings in him – and not just any strangers, but outcasts, people whom society fails to acknowledge. One might object that what A articulates is less a form of true sympathy than a narcissistic obsession with his own predicament. Indeed, in the fragment on the beggar in the green coat, A confesses that what affected him most was his own nostalgic childhood memories evoked by the encounter with the other,[73] and in the description of seeing the young girl he retains his position as an observer. However, despite its limitations, we can still appreciate his capacity for being moved by the plight of strangers. In relation to them, he achieves a sense of solidarity precisely within a shared ostracism. A thus finds empathy even in his estrangement and by virtue of it.

As a form of alienation from modern society, the aesthete's melancholia cannot only be interpreted as a result of his failure to become properly

[68] EO 1, 24/SKS 2, 32. [69] Cf. Tietjen and Furtak (2021). [70] EO 1, 40/SKS 2, 49.
[71] On melancholia and solitude, see Brady and Happala (2003). [72] EO1, 21/SKS 2, 29.
[73] See Furtak (2003), pp. 429–430. Cf. McCarthy (1978), p. 115: the "Diapsalmata" are here described as "a study" in "melancholy which refuses to resolve itself." On how Kierkegaard anticipates Freud in arguing that "the melancholic has insight into the human condition," see McCarthy (2015), pp. 15–18.

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involved with the world and, especially, the everyday world of work and social interaction. It can also be interpreted as a sign of how he rejects engaging in meaningless work and shallow relationships and sustaining oppressive social structures. The tension between these two interpretations mirrors a tension within the concept of melancholia itself. While it is traditionally associated with aristocratic boredom and idleness and the lauded cures of action and labor, feminist authors have highlighted that meaningless work and oppression can be the cause rather than cure of melancholia, and that melancholia itself can be a kind of "outlaw emotion," a way to resist the modern dictate of happiness.[74] The aesthete's incapacity – or unwillingness? – to feel at home in the world at large and to build up and sustain close relationships to specific others in this context might be what, in the first place, makes him receptive to the fate of other misconstrued and unfortunate souls.

Aesthetic Production and Expression

What allows us to ascribe melancholia to the aesthete, accordingly, is not only the fact that, *in some fragments*, he describes his own state as melancholic or shows it to be; rather, it is that his fragments *as a whole*, in content, form, and structure, express a state of melancholia. Lacking conceptual or narrative progression, the "Diapsalmata" fragments are arranged in no particular order, as their editor tells us,[75] lyrical passages written on loose pages. The cacophony of moods that we can observe in A throughout his fluctuations is, in this sense, "a mood, a single color."[76] His incapacity for sustaining passions amounts to an overall unhappiness, a background of melancholia that accompanies him everywhere. Although it is true of the aesthete that he exists "in a series of unrelated moods" and that as a consequence he lacks the "continuity which binds a self together,"[77] we can for this very reason characterize him as (consistently) impetuous, fragmented, and comprehensively melancholic. The scraps of paper on which his lamentations are written capture momentary outbursts, without coherence. In this respect, they are a reflected image of the young man himself, in his unhappy state of permanent flux.

So far, we have argued that despite the immense suffering and failure associated with the aesthete's mode of being, his melancholia still mirrors a

[74] See, for example, Ahmed (2010), esp. pp. 121–159. On "outlaw emotions," see also Jaggar (1989).
[75] EO 1, 7–8/SKS 2, 15–16. [76] EO 1, 28/SKS 2, 37.
[77] Söderquist (2007), p. 160. Cf. Stokes (2015a) and Strawson (2009), on "episodic" selfhood.

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profound understanding of important aspects of the world and significant features of human existence as such, namely, its and our impermanence, pain, and tragic contingency. In this regard, melancholia can be regarded as an appropriate response to human existence, to the vulnerability and insecurity of all that we value.[78] Moreover, we have portrayed the aesthete's melancholia as a state oscillating between intense passion on the one hand and apathy or boredom on the other, and have pointed out that his relationships oscillate from alienation and loneliness to sympathy for the outcasts of society. Throughout all of this, the aesthete's existence appeared primarily as a contemplative and reflective state rather than as a life of active engagement, eager to change the world. It has been claimed that it is this lack of engagement characteristic of melancholia that is potentially detrimental,[79] and we ourselves have argued that even in his empathetic reactions, the aesthete remains withdrawn and falls short of meaningful engagement with others.

However, all of this is only part of the truth. A's poetic production, as exemplified by the "Diapsalmata" themselves, reveals that he *does* meaningfully engage with the world. Even if not addressed to any specific reader, or perhaps any reader at all, his writings can be interpreted as an attempt to reach out to the world and speak to others who potentially will understand him. So, although it may be true that the very same features that explain the potential epistemic virtue of melancholia – its contemplative nature that attunes the melancholy to finitude, fragility, and futility – also explain its potential vices, such as the melancholy's withdrawn and largely passive life – still, this picture is incomplete in that it overlooks another key feature of melancholia, namely its association with intellectual brilliance and, even more important in the present context, creative energy. The link between melancholia, creativity, and brilliance is a recurring topic in the literature on melancholia.[80] Melancholia has been portrayed as the painful side effect of creativity but also as its enabling condition. If it is true that the aesthete's melancholia attunes him both to specific aspects of the world and to the human condition as such, in ways that otherwise would remain unnoticed, and allows or even urges him to

[78] See Sagdahl (2021). On existential insecurity, see Krishek and Furtak (2012).
[79] Sagdahl (2021), pp. 337–339, 346.
[80] Think, paradigmatically, of Aristotle's question, "Why is it that all men who have become outstanding in philosophy, statesmanship, poetry or the arts are melancholic, or are infected by the diseases arising from black bile?" See, for example, Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl (2019), esp. pp. 215–274.

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express these features, this would be another reason counting in favor of melancholia. Like the lyrical voice in Emily Dickinson's poem, who praises the state of dwelling in possibility yet in her praise also brings something concrete into actuality, and the speaker in Rainer Maria Rilke's sonnet, who longs for openness and receptivity yet in expressing this quest also brings into being a determinate creative production, so too is the aesthete far from leading a life in which nothing is realized.

For it may be that A becomes who he is through negation, by defining himself in terms of what he is not – not, for instance, one of the "busy bustlers"[81] – and by his constant Rilkean receptivity to transformation as the numerous "Doors" and "Windows" of Dickinson's stanza are kept open. He claims that "the most beautiful time is the first period of falling in love,"[82] because it is rich with possibilities, none of which have been negated or compromised, which keep a person steadily captivated. Constantly being transformed, the aesthete demands that we adopt an "understanding of identity as fluid or metamorphic – its blazing, brilliant plasticity capable of undergoing the most extreme transformations without losing integrity."[83] Rejecting the secure complacency of a stable "ethical" life like that of Judge William, he asks us to consider whether an aesthetic existence could have its own kind of (moral) value and integrity.

And clearly it does. "What is a poet?," the question that stands at the outset of A's series of fragments, is only partially answered. Yes, it is someone who creates "beautiful music" out of "profound anguish," but it does not follow that this existence is only lamentable, that of an "unhappy person" *tout court*, as A claims.[84] For his writing is a central, perhaps *the* central, defining feature of his life: Therefore, the life cannot be adequately evaluated without taking stock of the writing itself. To live poetically is to invest in the process of becoming someone, in particular, relating to actuality by striving to become oneself:[85] It is to practice philosophy as a way of life and simultaneously as an act of writing. The author of the "Diapsalmata" becomes just that, an author, by composing the fragments that inscribe him into the world and into the memory of his readers. Holding on to his unquenchable longing, avoiding inauthentic modes of being, he becomes what he is: a poet. This is the result of opting to choose neither "either" nor "or." It is a life worth living, one of being

[81] EO 1, 25/SKS 2, 33. [82] EO 1, 24/SKS 2, 33.
[83] Mulhall (2013), pp. 13–14. Mulhall has in mind another, pertinent, context. Cf. Mooney (1996), p. 102.
[84] EO 1, 19/SKS 2, 27. [85] Cf. Walsh (1994), pp. 56–62.

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receptive and responsive to the fate of other alienated souls, one that sustains "the passion of possibility," that is, "the eye, eternally young, eternally ardent, that sees possibility everywhere."[86] Resisting the acceptance of an all-too-human place in the world, A perpetuates a melancholic mood that can perhaps best be described simply as "that of a poet."[87] In the end, he attains this identity, almost in spite of himself.

[86] EO 1, 41/SKS 2, 50.

[87] Harries (2010), pp. 14–17. See also Kemp (2016), p. 21. Cf. Mackey (1971), p. 37: "A," although "in a sense all of us, is in another and equally crucial sense none of us."

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