

EITHER/OR

A FRAGMENT OF LIFE

edited by
Victor Eremita

PART I
CONTAINING A'S PAPERS

Is reason then alone baptized,
are the passions pagans?

YOUNG

PREFACE¹ [I V]

It may at times have occurred to you, dear reader, to doubt somewhat the accuracy of that familiar philosophical thesis that the outer is the inner and the inner is the outer.² Perhaps you yourself have concealed a secret that in its joy or in its pain you felt was too intimate to share with others. Perhaps your life has put you in touch with people about whom you suspected that something of this nature was the case, although neither by force nor by inveiglement were you able to bring out into the open that which was hidden. Perhaps neither case applies to you and your life, and yet you are not unacquainted with that doubt; like a fleeting shape, it has drifted through your mind now and then. A doubt such as this comes and goes, and no one knows whence it comes or whither it goes.³ I myself have always been rather heretically minded on this philosophical point and therefore early in my life developed the habit of making observations and investigations as well as possible. For guidance, I have consulted the authors whose view I shared in this respect—in brief, I have done all I could to make up for what has been left undone in the philosophical writings. Gradually, then, hearing became my most cherished sense, for just as the voice is the disclosure of inwardness incommensurable with the exterior, so the ear is the instrument that apprehends this inwardness, hearing the sense by which it is appropriated. Consequently, every time I found a contradiction between what I saw and what I heard, my doubt was confirmed [1 VI] and my zeal for observation increased. A priest who hears confessions is separated by a grillwork from the person making confession; he does not see him, he only hears. As he listens, he gradually forms a picture of the other's outward appearance corresponding to what he hears; thus he finds no contradiction. It is different, however, when one sees and hears simultaneously but sees a grillwork between oneself and the speaker. My efforts to make observations along this line have been quite varied as far as results are concerned. At times I have had luck, at times not, and to obtain any returns along these paths, one needs luck. But I have never lost the desire to continue my investigations. If at times I have been about to

regret my persistence, so also at times my efforts have been crowned with unexpected good fortune. It was just such unexpected good fortune that in a most curious manner put me in possession of the papers I hereby have the honor to present to the reading public. In these papers, I had an opportunity to take a look at the lives of two men, which confirmed my suspicion that the outer is not the inner. This was especially true of one of them. His exterior has been a complete contradiction of his interior. To a certain extent, it is also true of the other, inasmuch as he has hidden a more significant interior under a rather insignificant exterior.

For the sake of order, it is probably best to tell first how I happened to come into possession of these papers. It is now about seven years since I spotted in a secondhand shop here in the city a writing desk that immediately attracted my attention. It was not a modern piece of work, had been used considerably, and yet it captivated me. It is impossible for me to explain the basis of this impression, but most people presumably have had a similar experience during their lives. My daily route took me past this secondhand dealer and his writing desk, and I never let a day go by without fixing my eyes on it in passing. Gradually that desk assumed a history for me; to see it became a necessity to me, and when on a rare occasion it was necessary to make a detour for its sake, I did not hesitate. With time, as I looked at it, the desire awakened in me to own it. To be sure, I felt that it was a strange desire, since I had no use for this piece of furniture, and it would be a prodigality for me to purchase it. But desire, as is known, is very sophisticated. [I VII] I found a pretext for going into the secondhand shop, inquired about other things, and as I was about to leave I casually made a very low offer for the writing desk. I thought the dealer would possibly accept it. In that case, it would be a coincidence that played into my hands. It certainly was not for the sake of the money that I acted this way, but for the sake of my conscience. It misfired; the dealer was exceptionally rigid. For a time, I again walked by every day and gazed at the desk with enamored eyes. You must make up your mind, I thought. Suppose it is sold; then it is too late, and even if you managed to get hold of it again, you still would never have the same impression of it. My heart pounded when I went into the shop. I bought it and paid for it. This is the last time you are going to be so prodigal, I thought. In fact, it is really lucky that you did buy it, for every time you look at it you will be reminded of

how prodigal you were; with this desk commences a new period in your life. Ah, desire is very eloquent, and good intentions are always on hand.

The writing desk was set up in my apartment, and just as in the first phase of my infatuation I had my pleasure in gazing at it from the street, so now I walked by it here at home. Gradually I learned to know its numerous features, its many drawers and compartments, and in every respect I was happy with my desk. But it was not to remain that way. In the summer of 1836, my duties allowed me to make a little journey to the country for a week. Arrangements were made with the coachman for five o'clock in the morning. The clothes I needed to take along had been packed the previous evening; everything was in order. I was already awake at four o'clock, but the picture of the beautiful countryside I was going to visit had such an intoxicating effect on me that I fell asleep again or into a dream. Presumably my servant wanted me to have all the sleep I could get, for he did not call me until six-thirty. The coachman was already blowing his horn, and although ordinarily I am disinclined to obey the orders of others, I have always made an exception of a coachman and his poetic motifs. I dressed quickly and was already at the door when the thought crossed my mind: Do you have enough money in your pocketbook? There was not much. I opened the desk to pull out the money drawer and take what happened to be at hand. But the drawer would not budge. Every expedient was futile. It was a most calamitous situation. To run into such difficulties at the very moment when the coachman's enticing tones were still ringing in my ears! The blood rushed to my [I VIII] head; I was furious. Just as Xerxes had the sea whipped,⁴ so I decided to take dreadful revenge. A hatchet was fetched. I gave the desk a terrible blow with it. Whether in my rage I aimed wrong or the drawer was just as stubborn as I, the result was not what was intended. The drawer was shut, and the drawer stayed shut. But something else happened. Whether my blow struck precisely this spot or the vibration through the entire structure of the desk was the occasion, I do not know, but this I do know—a secret door that I had never noticed before sprung open. This door closed off a compartment that I obviously had not discovered. Here, to my great amazement, I found a mass of papers, the papers that constitute the contents of the present publication. My decision remained unchanged. At the first post house, I would borrow some money. In the greatest haste, a mahogany box that usually contained a pair of pistols was

emptied and the papers deposited into it. Joy was victorious and had gained an unexpected augmentation. In my heart, I begged the desk's forgiveness for the rough treatment, while my thought found its suspicion strengthened—that the outer is certainly not the inner—and my experiential thesis was confirmed: it takes a stroke of luck to make such discoveries.

In the middle of the forenoon, I reached Hillerød,⁵ straightened out my finances, and gained an overall impression of the glorious region. Right away the next morning, I began my excursions, which now took on quite another character than I originally had intended. My servant accompanied me with the mahogany box. I looked for a romantic spot in the forest where I would be as safe as possible from any surprise and there took out the documents. The innkeeper, noticing these frequent rambles in the company of a mahogany box, volunteered that perhaps I was practicing shooting with my pistols. I was much obliged to him for this remark and let him continue under that impression.

A quick look at the discovered papers readily showed me that they formed two groups, with a marked external difference as well. The one was written on a kind of letter-vellum, in quarto, with a rather wide margin. The handwriting was legible, sometimes even a bit meticulous, in one place slovenly. The other was written on full sheets of beehive paper⁶ with ruled columns such as legal documents and the like are written on. The handwriting was distinct, somewhat drawn out, uniform and even; it seemed to be that of a businessman. [I IX] The contents immediately appeared to be different also: the one contained a number of esthetic essays of varying lengths; the other consisted of two long studies and a shorter one, all with ethical content, it seemed, and in the form of letters. On closer inspection, this difference was entirely confirmed. The latter group does indeed consist of letters written to the author of the first group.

But it is necessary to find a more concise expression to characterize the two authors. With that in mind, I have gone through the papers very carefully but have found nothing or practically nothing. As far as the first author, the esthete, is concerned, there is no information at all about him. As far as the other, the letter writer, is concerned, we learn that his name is William and that he has been a judge, but the court is not stipulated. If I were to hold scrupulously to the historical and call him William, I would

lack a corresponding designation for the first author; I would be obliged to give him an arbitrary name. For this reason, I have preferred to call the first author A, the second B.

Besides the longer pieces, a number of scraps of paper were found on which were written aphorisms, lyrical utterances and reflections. The handwriting itself indicated that they belonged to A, and the contents confirmed this.

Then I tried to organize the papers in the best manner. With B's papers it was rather easy to do. One letter presupposes the other. In the second letter, we find a quotation from the first; the third letter presupposes the two preceding ones.

Organizing A's papers was not so easy. Therefore I have let chance fix the order—that is, I have let them remain in the order in which I found them, without, of course, being able to decide whether this order has chronological value or ideal significance. The scraps of paper lay loose in the compartment, and I therefore had to assign them a place. I have placed them first, because it seemed to me that they could best be regarded as preliminary glimpses into what the longer pieces develop more coherently. I have called them Διαψάσματα⁷ and added [I x] as a kind of motto: *ad se ipsum* [to himself].⁸ In a way, this title and the motto are by me and yet not by me. They are by me insofar as they are applied to the whole collection, but they belong to A himself, for the word Διαψάσματα was written on one of the scraps of paper, and on two of them appear the words *ad se ipsum*. In keeping with what A himself has often done, I have also had printed on the inside of the title page a short French poem found above one of these aphorisms. Inasmuch as the majority of these aphorisms have a lyrical form, I thought it appropriate to use the word Διαψάσματα as the general title. If the reader considers this an unfortunate choice, I owe it to the truth to admit that it is my own idea and that the word certainly was used with discrimination by A himself for the aphorism over which it was found.⁹ The ordering of the individual aphorisms I have left to chance. That the particular expressions often contradict one another, I found entirely appropriate, for this indeed belongs essentially to the mood; I decided it was not worth the trouble to arrange them so the contradictions were less obvious. I followed chance, and it is also chance that called my attention to the fact that the first and last aphorisms are somewhat complementary in

that the one piercingly feels, as it were, the pain of being a poet, and the other relishes the satisfaction in always having the laughter on one's side.

As far as A's esthetic treatises are concerned, there is nothing about them that I would stress. They were all ready for printing, and if they contain any difficulties, I must let them speak for themselves. For my part, may I point out that to the Greek quotations found here and there I have added a translation taken from one of the better German translations.

¹⁰The last of A's papers is a narrative titled "The Seducer's Diary." Here we meet new difficulties, inasmuch as A does not declare himself the author but only the editor. This is an old literary device to which I would not have much to object if it did not further complicate my own position, since one author becomes enclosed within the other like the boxes in a Chinese puzzle. This is not the place to explain in greater detail what confirms me in my view; I shall only point out that the [I XI] prevailing mood in A's preface somehow manifests the poet.

It really seems as if A himself had become afraid of his fiction, ¹¹which, like a troubled dream, continued to make him feel uneasy, also in the telling. If it was an actual event of which he had secret knowledge, then I find it strange that the preface carries no trace of A's joy over seeing the realization of the idea he had often vaguely entertained. The idea of the seducer is suggested in the piece on the immediate erotic as well as in "Silhouettes"—namely, that the counterpart to Don Giovanni must be a reflective seducer in the category of the interesting, ¹² where the issue therefore is not how many he seduces but how. I find no trace of such joy in the preface but indeed, as noted previously, a trepidation, a certain horror, that presumably has its basis in his poetic relation to this idea. And A's reaction does not surprise me, for I, too, who have nothing at all to do with this narrative—indeed, am twice removed from the original author—I, too, sometimes have felt quite strangely uneasy when I have been occupied with these papers in the stillness of the night. It seemed to me as if the seducer himself paced my floor like a shadow, as if he glanced at the papers, as if he fixed his demonic eyes on me, and said, "Well, well, so you want to publish my papers! You know that is irresponsible of you; you will indeed arouse anxiety in the darling girls. But, of course, in recompense you will make me and my kind innocuous. There you are mistaken, for I merely change the method, and so my situation is all the more advantageous. What a flock of

young girls will run straight into a man's arms when they hear the seductive name: a seducer! Give me half a year, and I will produce a story that will be ever so much more interesting than everything I have so far experienced. I picture to myself a young, energetic girl of genius having the extraordinary idea of wanting to avenge her sex on me. She thinks she will be able to coerce me, to make me taste the pains of unhappy love. That, you see, is a girl for me. If she herself does not think of it profoundly enough, I shall come to her assistance. I shall writhe like the Molbos' eel.¹³ And when I have brought her to the point where I want her, then she is mine."

But perhaps I have already misused my position as editor to burden the readers with my observations. The situation must [I XII] be my excuse; the dubiousness of my position, owing to A's calling himself the editor and not the author of this narrative, allowed me to be carried away.

Anything else I have to add about this narrative I can do only in my role as editor. That is, I believe that in this narrative there is a specification of time. Here and there in the diary a date is given, but the year is lacking. Thus, I seem unable to go further, but I believe that by scrutinizing the dates more closely I have found a lead. Admittedly, every year has an April 7, a July 3, an August 2, etc., but it by no means follows that April 7 is a Monday every year. I have done some checking and have found out that this specification fits the year 1834. Whether A has thought of this, I cannot decide, but I hardly think so, for in that case he would not have taken as much precaution as he otherwise does. Nor does the diary say: Monday, April 7, etc. It says merely: April 7. In fact, the entry begins like this: So, on Monday—and attention is thereby diverted, but by reading through the entry under this date one sees that it must have been a Monday. I have, then, a specified time for this narrative, but every attempt I have made so far to use it to determine the time of the other treatises has failed. I could just as well have assigned it place number three, but, as I said before, I have preferred to let chance prevail, and everything remains in the order in which I found it.

As far as B's papers are concerned, they order themselves easily and naturally. But I did make one change in them: I have permitted myself to give them titles, because the letter form made it difficult for the author to give a title to these inquiries. Should the reader, therefore, after familiarizing himself with the contents, find that the titles were not

feliculously chosen, I shall always be willing to put up with the pain inherent in having done something wrong when one wanted to do something well.

Occasionally there is in the margin a comment, which I have made into a footnote lest I encroach distractingly upon the text.

As far as B's manuscript is concerned, I have not permitted [I XIII] myself to make any changes whatsoever but have scrupulously regarded it as a document. Perhaps I could easily have deleted an occasional negligence, which is quite understandable when one considers that he is merely a letter writer. I did not wish to do so, because I feared going too far. When B supposes that out of a hundred people who go astray in the world ninety-nine are saved by women and one by divine grace,¹⁴ it is easy to see that he is not very good in mathematics, inasmuch as he gives no place to those who are actually lost. I could easily have made a little change in the numbers, but to me there is something much more beautiful in B's miscalculation. In another place, B mentions a Greek wise man by the name of Myson and relates that he enjoyed the rare good fortune of being counted among the seven sages, when their number is set at fourteen.¹⁵ For a while, I was perplexed about the source of B's wisdom and also about which Greek author he could be quoting. I immediately suspected that it was Diogenes Laertius,¹⁶ and by checking Jøcher¹⁷ and Morèri¹⁸ I did indeed find reference to him. B's account might very well need correction, for the matter does not stand just as he relates, even though among the ancients there is some uncertainty in the designation of who the seven sages were, but I still did not think it worth the trouble; it seemed to me that his remark, even though not exactly historical, did have another value.

As early as five years ago, I had reached the point where I am at present; I had ordered the papers as they are now arranged, had decided to publish them, but nevertheless felt it was best to wait for a time. I considered five years a suitable interval. These five years are over, and I begin where I left off. Presumably I need not reassure the reader that I have not left untried any means of tracing the authors. The secondhand dealer did not keep records, which, as is commonly known, is rarely the case with secondhand dealers; he did not know from whom he had purchased that piece of furniture. He seemed to remember buying it at a mixed auction. I shall not venture to tell the [I XIV] reader about the many futile attempts that have cost me so much time, so much the less because recollection of them is no

pleasure to me. I can share the results with the reader very briefly, for the results were nothing at all.

As I was about to carry out my decision to publish these papers, I had one particular misgiving. Perhaps the reader will permit me to speak quite candidly. The question occurred to me whether I might not become guilty of an indiscretion toward the unknown authors. But the more familiar I became with the papers, the more that misgiving diminished. The papers were of such a nature that, despite all my careful scrutiny, they yielded no information. A reader would be even less likely to find anything, since I do presume to be the equal of any reader, not in taste and sympathy and insight, but certainly in diligence and indefatigability. Therefore, if it was assumed that the unknown authors were still alive, that they lived here in the city, that they would unexpectedly recognize their own papers—nevertheless, nothing would result from the publication, provided that the authors themselves remained silent, for, in the most rigorous sense, these papers, as is ordinarily said of all printed matter, are silent.

Another misgiving I had was in and by itself less important, fairly easy to dismiss, and has been dismissed even more easily than I had expected. It occurred to me, namely, that these papers could become a financial consideration. I thought that it would be quite proper for me to accept a little honorarium for my pains as editor, but I would have to regard an author's honorarium as much too large. Just as the honest Scottish farmers in *The White Lady*¹⁹ decide to buy the estate and cultivate it and then give it to the earls of Evenel if they should ever come back, so I decided to invest the honorarium on behalf of the unknown authors in order, if they should ever come forward, to be able to give them the whole amount together with interest and interest on the interest. If the reader has not already decided on the basis of my complete awkwardness that I am no author, nor a literary man who makes a profession of being an editor, then the naïveté of this reasoning will surely remove all doubts. This misgiving, then, was dismissed far more easily, for an author's honorarium in Denmark is no manorial estate, and the unknown authors would have to stay away a long time before their honorarium, even with interest and interest on the interest, would become a financial consideration.

All that remained was only to give these papers a title. I [I xv] could call them Papers, Posthumous Papers, Found Papers, Lost Papers, etc. There is, of course, a multiplicity of variations, but none of these titles satisfied me. In determining the title, I have therefore allowed myself some freedom, a deception for which I shall attempt to give an accounting. In my continual preoccupation with these papers, it dawned on me that they might take on a new aspect if they were regarded as belonging to one person. I know very well all the objections that could be made against this view—that it is unhistorical, and that it is improbable inasmuch as it is unreasonable that one person could be the author of both parts, although the reader could easily be tempted by the pun that ²⁰when one has said A, one must also say B. Nevertheless I have been unable to abandon the idea. So, then, there was a person who in his lifetime had experienced both movements or had reflected upon both movements. A's papers contain a multiplicity of approaches to an esthetic view of life. A coherent esthetic view of life can hardly be presented. B's papers contain an ethical view of life. As I allowed my soul to be influenced by this thought, it became clear to me that I could let it guide me in determining the title. The title I have chosen expresses precisely this. The reader cannot lose much because of this title, for during his reading he may very well forget the title. Then, when he has read the book, he can perhaps think of the title. This will release him from every final question—whether A actually was persuaded and repented, whether B was victorious, or whether perhaps B finally came around to A's thinking. In this respect, these papers come to no conclusion. If someone finds this inappropriate, he is still not justified in calling it a defect but ought to call it a misfortune. I for my part regard it as a piece of good fortune. We sometimes come upon novels in which specific characters represent contrasting views of life. They usually end with one persuading the other. The point of view ought to speak for itself, but instead the reader is furnished with the historical result that the other was persuaded. I consider it fortunate that these papers provide no enlightenment in this respect. Whether A wrote the esthetic pieces after receiving B's letters, whether his soul subsequently continued to flounder around in its wild unruliness or whether it calmed down—I do not find myself capable of offering the slightest enlightenment about this, inasmuch as the [I xvi] papers contain nothing. Neither do they contain any hint as to how it went with B, whether he was able to hold fast to his point of view or not. Thus, when the book is

read, A and B are forgotten; only the points of view confront each other and expect no final decision in the particular personalities.

I have nothing more to say, except that it occurred to me that the honored authors, if they were aware of my undertaking, might wish to complement their papers with a word to the reader. I shall therefore add a few words with a guided pen. A presumably would have no objection to the publication of the papers,²¹ and he probably would shout to the reader, “Read them or do not read them, you will regret it either way.”²² What B would say is more difficult to determine. He perhaps would reproach me for something or other, especially with regard to the publication of A’s papers; he would make me feel that he had no part in it, that he would wash his hands. Having done that, he perhaps would address the book with these words: “Go out into the world, then; avoid, if possible, the attention of the critics; visit an individual reader in a favorably disposed hour, and if you should encounter a reader of the fair sex, then I would say: My charming reader, in this book you will find something that you perhaps should not know, something else from which you will presumably benefit by coming to know it. Read, then, the something in such a way that, having read it, you may be as one who has not read it;²³ read the something else in such a way that, having read it, you may be as one who has not forgotten what has been read.” As editor, I shall add only the wish that the book may meet the reader in a favorably disposed hour and that the charming reader may succeed in scrupulously following B’s well-intentioned advice.²⁴

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EDITOR