

Gilleleie, August 1, 1835

As I have now tried to show in the preceding pages, this is how things actually looked to me. But when I try to get clear about my life, everything looks different. Just as it takes a long time for a child to learn to distinguish itself from objects and an equally long time to disengage itself from its surroundings, with the result that it stresses the objective side and says, for example, “me hit the horse,” so the same phenomenon is repeated in a higher spiritual sphere. I therefore believed that I would possibly achieve more tranquility by taking another line of study, by directing my energies toward another goal. I might have succeeded for a time in banishing a certain restlessness, but it probably would have come back more intense, like a fever after drinking cold water.

What I really need is to get clear about what I must do,¹ not what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must precede every act. What matters is to find a purpose, to see what it really is that God wills that *I* shall do; the crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth *for me*,² to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*. Of what use would it be to me to discover a so-called objective truth, to work thorough the philosophical systems so that I could, if asked, make critical judgments about them, could point out the fallacies in each system; of what use would it be to me to be able to develop a theory of the state, getting details from the various sources and combining them into a whole, and constructing a world I did not live in but merely held up for others to see; of what use would it be to me to be able to formulate the meaning of Christianity, to be able to explain many specific points—if it had not deeper meaning *for me and for my life*? And the better I was at it, the more I saw others appropriate the creations of my mind, the

¹How often, when a person believes that he has the best grip on himself, it turns out that he has embraced a cloud instead of Juno.

²Only then does one have an inner experience, but how many experience life's different impressions the way the sea sketches figures in the sand and then promptly erases them without a trace.

more tragic my situation would be, not unlike the that of parents who in their poverty are forced to send their children out into the world and turn them over to the case of others. Of what use would it be to me for turth to stand before me, cold and naked, not caring whether or not I acknowledged it, making me uneasy rather than trustingly receptive. I certainly do not deny that I still accept an *imperative of knowledge* and that through it men may be influenced, but *then it must come alive in me*, and *this* is what I now recognize as the most important of all. This is what my soul thirsts for as the African deserts thirst for water. This is what is lacking, and this is why I am like a man who has collected furniture, rented an apartment, but as yet as not found the beloved to share life's ups and downs with him. But in order to find that idea—or, to put it more correctly—to find myself, it does no good to plunge still farther into the world. That was just what I did before. The reason I thought it would be good to throw myself into law was that I believed I could develop my keenness of mind in the many muddles and messes of life. Here, too, was offered a whole mass of details in which I could lose myself; here, perhaps, with teh given facts, I could construct a totality, an organic view of criminal life, pursue it in all its dark aspects (here, too, a certain fraternity of spirit is very evident). I also wanted to become a lawyer so that by putting myself in another's role I could, so to speak, find a substitute for my own life and by means of this external change find some diversion. This is what I needed to lead a *completely human life* and not merely one of *knowledge*,³ so that I could base the development of my thought not on—yes, not on something called objective—something which in any case is not my own, but upon something which is bound up with the deepest roots of my existence, through which I am, so to speak, grafted into the divine, to which I cling fast even though the whole world may collapse. *This is what I need, and this is what I*

³How close men, despite all their knowledge, usually live to madness? What is truth but to live for an idea? When all is said and done, everything is based on a postulate; but not until it no longer stands on the outside, not until one lives in it, does it cease to be a postulate. (Dialectic—Dispute)

strive for. I find joy and refreshment in contemplating the great men who have found that precious stone for which they sell all, even their lives ⁴ whether I see them becoming vigorously engaged in life, confidently proceeding on their chosen course without vacillating, or discover them off the beaten path, absorbed in themselves and in working toward their high goal. I even honor and respect the by-path which lies toward their high goal. It is this inward action of man, this God-side of man, which is decisive, not a mass of data, for the latter will no doubt follow and will not appear as accidental aggregates or as a succession of details, one after the other, without a system, without a focal point. I, too, have certainly looked for this focal point. I have vainly sought an anchor in the boundless sea of pleasure as well as in the depths of knowledge. I have felt the almost irresistible power with which one pleasure reaches a hand to the next; I have also felt the boredom, the shattering, which follows on its heels. I have tasted the fruits of the tree of knowledge and time and again have delighted in their savoriness. But this joy was only in the moment of cognition and did not leave a deeper mark on me. It seems to me that I have not drunk from the cup of wisdom but have fallen into it. I have sought to find the principle for me life through resignation, by supposing that since everything proceeds according to inscrutable laws it could not be otherwise, by blunting my ambitions and the antennae of my vanity. Because I could not get everything to suit me, I abdicated with a consciousness of my own competence, somewhat the way decrepit clergymen resign with pension. What did I find? Not my self, which is what I did seek to find in a way (I imaged my soul, if I may say so, as shut up in a box with a spring lock, which external surroundings would release by pressing the spring). —Consequently the seeking and finding of the Kingdom of Heaven was the first thing to be resolved. But it is

⁴Thus it will be easy for us the first time we receive that ball of yarn from Ariadne (love) and then go through all the mazes of the labyrinth (life) and kill the monster. But how many there are who plunge into life (the labyrinth) without taking that precaution (the *young* girls and the little boys who are sacrificed every year to the Minotaurus—?)

just as useless for a man to want first of all to decide the externals and after that the fundamentals as it is for a cosmic surface, to what bodies it should turn its light, to which its dark side, without first let the harmony of centrifugal and centripetal forces realize its existence and letting the rest come of itself. One must first learn to know himself before knowing anything else (γνῶθι σεαυτόν). Not until a man has inwardly understood *himself* and then sees the course he is to take does his life gain peace and meaning; only then is he free of that irksome, sinister traveling companion —that irony of life ⁵ which manifests itself in the sphere of knowledge and invites true knowing to being with a not-knowing (Socrates), ⁶ just as God created the world from nothing. But in the waters of morality it is especially at home to those still have not entered the tradewinds of virtue. Here it tumbles a person about in a horrible way, for a time lets him feel happy and content in his resolve to go ahead along the right path, then hurls him into the abyss of despair. Often it lulls a man to sleep with the thought, “After all, things cannot be otherwise,” only to awaken him suddenly to a rigorous interrogation. Frequently it seems to let a veil of forgetfulness fall over the past, only to make every single trifle appear in a strong light again. When he struggles along the right path, rejoicing in having overcome temptations power, there may come at almost the same time, right on the heels of perfect victory, an apparently insignificant external circumstance which pushes him down, like Sisyphus, from the height of the crag. Often when a person has concentrated on something, a minor external circumstance arises which destroys everything. As in

⁵It may very well in a certain sense remain, but he is able to bear the swells of this life, for the more a man lives for an idea, the more easily he comes to sit on the “I wonder” seat before the whole world. —Frequently, when one is most convinced that he understands himself, he is assaulted by the uneasy feeling that he has really only learned someone else’s life by rote.

⁶There is also a proverb which says: “One hears the truth from children and the insane.” Here it is certainly not a question of having truth according to premises and conclusions, but how often have not the words of a child or an insane person thundered at the man who would not listen to an intellectual genius.

the case of a man who, weary of life, is about to throw himself into the Thames and at the crucial moment is halted by the sting of a mosquito.) Frequently a person feels his very best when the illness is the worst, as in tuberculosis. In vain he tries to resist it but he has not sufficient strength, and it is no help to him that he has gone through the same thing many times; the kind of practice acquired in this way does not apply here. Just as no one who has been taught a great deal about swimming is able to keep afloat in a storm, but only the man who is intensely convinced and has experienced that he is actually lighter than water, so a person who lacks this inward point of poise is unable to keep afloat in life's storms. —Only when a man has understood himself in this way is he able to maintain an independent existence and thus avoid surrendering his own *I*. How often we see (in a person when we extol that Greek historian because he knows how to appropriate an unfamiliar style so delusively like the original author's, instead of censuring him, since the first prize always goes to an author for having his own style—that is, a mode of expression and presentation qualified by his own individuality)—how often we see people who either out of mental-spiritual laziness live on the crumbs that fall from another's table or for more egotistical reasons seek to identify themselves with others, until eventually they believe it all, just like the liar through which frequent repetition of his stories. Although I am still far from this kind of interior understanding of myself, with profound respect for its significance I have sought to preserve my individuality—worshipped the unknown God. With a premature anxiety I have tried to avoid coming in close contact with those things whose force of attraction might be too powerful for me. I have sought to appropriate much from them, studied their distinctive characteristics and meaning in human life, but at the same time guarded against coming, like the moth, too close to the flame. I have had little to win or to lose in association with the ordinary run of men, partly because what they do—so-called practical life—does not interest me much, partly because their coldness and indifference to the spiritual and deeper currents in man alienate me even more from them. With few exceptions my companions have had no special

influence upon me. A life that has not arrived at clarify about itself must necessarily exhibit an uneven side-surface; confronted by certain facts and their apparent disharmony, they simply halted there, for, as I see it, they did not have sufficient interest to seek a resolution in a higher harmony or to recognize the necessity of it. Their opinion of me was always one-sided, and I have vacillated between putting too much or too little weight on what they said. I have now withdrawn from their influence and the potential variations of my life's compass resulting from it. Thus I am again standing at the point where I must begin again in another way. I shall now calmly attempt to look at myself and begin to initiate inner action; for only thus will I be able, like a child calling itself "I" in its first consciously undertaken act, be able to call myself "I" in a profounder sense.

But that takes stamina, and it is not possible to harvest immediately what one has sown. I will remember that philosopher's method of having his disciples keep silent for three years; then I dare say it will come. Just as one does not begin a feast at sunrise but at sundown, just so in the spiritual world one must first work forward for some time before the sun really shines for us and rises in all its glory; for although it is true as it says that God lets his sun shine upon the good and the evil and lets the rain fall on the just and the unjust, it is not so in the spiritual world. So let the die be cast—I am crossing the Rubicon! No doubt this road takes me *into battle*, but I will not renounce it. I will not lament the past—why lament? I will work energetically and not waste time in regrets, like the person stuck in a bog and first calculating how far he has sunk without recognizing that during the time he spends on that he is sinking still deeper. I will hurry along the path I have found and shout to everyone I meet: Do not look back as Lot's wife did, but remember that we are struggling up a hill.

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