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Kierkegaard's Aesthetic Life View in Elliott Smith's *Either/Or*

Camille Richey

When people write about Elliott Smith's music, they cannot help but delve into the angst, hopelessness, and depression of his deceptively poppy choruses. When it comes to discussing the title of Smith's third album *Either/Or*, a title lifted straight from Søren Kierkegaard's published work from 150 years earlier, it is no surprise that what mainly gets compared between Smith and Kierkegaard are their melancholic dispositions—once referred to by Kierkegaard as his “faithful mistress” (Schultz 163). Nelson Gary, a friend of Smith, generally explains the title by saying, “Elliott, having a philosophy degree, lived and breathed the melancholy-saturated work of Søren Kierkegaard to the degree that he named an album after one of his books.” *Magnet Magazine* says the intriguing title reminds us, “Kierkegaard believed life is a cosmic joke and then you die” (Davis). In other words, the only statements out there that attempt to explain the connection between Smith's *Either/Or* and Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* essentially conclude with: Smith was depressed, he read Kierkegaard—who was also depressed—which made him even more depressed.

By comparing the actual themes laid out in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* to Smith's *Either/Or*, the album reveals itself to be much more than a vague reference to general reflections on melancholy; in fact, this melancholy is only one aspect in an entire work replete with various Kierkegaardian concepts. More specifically, in the book *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard sets up the idea of the aesthetic life view (in contrast to the ethical and the religious life views he proposes throughout his writings). Speaking through a rather unusual collection of advice, journals, and discourses written by fictitious authors like Author A and Johannes the Seducer (who are aesthetes themselves), Kierkegaard exposes the aesthete's core characteristics: a desire for passion, concern with time, and indecision. Unbeknownst to many Elliott Smith fans, the album *Either/Or* revolves very much around these exact characteristics. By closely examining the lyrics and taking into account how they are emphasized by song form and instrumentation, this paper demonstrates exactly how these aesthetic qualities—the desire for passion, concern with time, and indecision—shape Smith's *Either/Or*. Surely the album is not simply a nod to Kierkegaard's depression, but the product of an artist who resonated deeply with the philosopher's expression of the aesthete's world.

The Concept of Irony

Before diving into the characteristics of the aesthete, one thing needs to be understood: That is, the foundation for any of these life views, or the very thing that makes an individual's subjectivity possible, comes from the awareness of what Kierkegaard calls irony. In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard holds up Socrates as the poster child for irony because Socrates always questions, and ultimately negates, strongly held assumptions; in fact, Socrates is apt to deconstruct none other than the whole substantial world (Hong 31). By nullifying everything that once seemed established or obvious, Socrates the ironic subject, comes to the conclusion that he is ignorant; he knows nothing: "Actuality has lost its validity entirely" (28). What Socrates thought was concrete is nothing but artificial construction. To him "the whole of existence has become alien" (27), and the recognition that nothing is knowable is like a black abyss as wide as eternity, an "infinite absolute negativity" (27). It assures us that there is no objective reality, only perceptions; there is no univocal, authoritative purpose, only subjective decision.

Instead of wallowing away at the nothingness of the world (which certainly contributes to the melancholy felt both by Kierkegaard and Smith), Kierkegaard posits that becoming conscious of irony is actually freeing. It qualifies individuals to be true subjects (24), meaning individuals who are aware of their ability to make life-changing decisions. Because Socrates “grasps the nothing,” he is “free . . . of earnestness about anything” (35). He now “genuinely feels quite liberated” (35). In other words, irony may negate objective truth, but it gives people the ultimate freedom to choose for themselves. Because of irony, one is no longer bound by “civic commitments and obligations marking normal daily existence” (Khan 71), but only bound by what he or she wants to be. Simply put, irony reveals that there is no inherent meaning to the world (a realization that is both terrifying and liberating), but through it one can comprehend his or her own power to create meaning. Throughout the rest of his writings, Kierkegaard ultimately suggests that one creates meaning through three possible lenses: the religious, the ethical, and the aesthetic. That aesthetic life view is precisely what Smith seems to be most interested in.

In Smith’s album, irony rears its negative head most obviously in “Ballad of Big Nothing.” In fact, the message is so Kierkegaardian that it makes talk about the similar melancholy between Smith and Kierkegaard seem especially superficial. Again, Smith appears to be consumed by Kierkegaard’s own ideas, not just vaguely referencing them. This “Ballad of Big Nothing” starts with a simple double-tracked guitar riff, a repeating, descending open-fourth slide that immediately introduces us to a yearning, pessimistic emptiness. Yet, Smith manages to fill in some of the loneliness with a catchy bass line, peppy rhythm guitar chords, drums that don’t skimp on cymbals or upbeat snare punches, and a poppy chorus. Unlike some of his completely acoustic haunting numbers, this comes across more as a power ballad, an anthem even. While the upbeat instrumentals sound positive, they cannot completely overshadow his weighty lyrics about superficiality, subjectivity, and irony. After building up the melody to a climactic chorus, he confidently sings, “You can do what you want to whenever you want to / You can do what you want to there’s no one to stop you” (Smith). It’s a line that makes Smith into an ironic subject, one who understands the arbitrariness of the known world. There is no true authority except the individual. Each is free to make his or her own decisions. That first line “You can do what you want to whenever you want to” gets sung three more times by the end of the song. He croons the line higher, then lower, then over a different chord until adding, “Though it doesn’t mean a thing.” Ultimately it

funnels into his grand and final statement, “Big nothing.” These last two words are dynamically his loudest lyric, perhaps the one with the most assurance behind it—and maybe the most disdain as well. After all the searching, after all the observing and the philosophizing, there is only “infinite absolute negativity.” While Kierkegaard talks about this unfortunate realization as a necessary “qualification of subjectivity” (Hong 24), Smith seems less content with the process. Instead of arriving at subjectivity from meaninglessness, Smith flips it. He starts off knowing he is a free and active agent and then ends up at the black hole of nothingness, while the instrumentals couldn’t be more flauntingly final. Smith’s confrontation with the “big nothing” is not one of regret, intimidation, or defeat. Rather, it is a resolute belief, an emphatic acceptance of our existential situation. The only truth one can ever know is that there is no truth. This “anti-anthem or ironic anthem” (Nugent 97) suggests the final moment should be a good one. That message not only resonates with Kierkegaard’s concept of irony, but it also foreshadows the aesthete’s concern with time, a characteristic that will be discussed later in the paper.

Desire for Passion

Smith’s album often personifies the aesthetic life view, which incorporates the aesthete’s desire for passion. The “Ballad of Big Nothing” not only encounters life’s meaninglessness, but it also describes a passionless world. The people are “dragging,” “sitting,” “waiting,” “tired,” “waiting to be taken away,” and “watching” the parade, which are all passive verbs—sedentary situations. Although this song takes place at a parade (usually a lively, crowded, even moving experience), Smith seems somewhat detached or disappointed, as do all of the other characters for that matter. All the commotion does not amount to any deeply felt purpose or meaning. This description of apathy is all too familiar to Kierkegaard’s aesthetes. It’s not that they are always disinterested, but that they are continually searching for palpable passion and therefore unsatisfied when they do not find it. For characters like Author A and Johannes the Seducer, passion is clearly the goal in life. Author A complains that “the times . . . are wretched, for they are without passion” (Hong 40) and that boredom is in fact “the root of all evil” (51). In “The Rotation of Crops,” Author A advises us to regularly adjust our daily schedules, living situations, and unenthusiastic habits in order to amuse ourselves more. He describes how entertaining a fly can be if

there are no other interesting objects available and how sweat dripping down a boring speaker's nose can turn a potentially terrible moment into a pleasurable one (60). Some of these descriptions may seem a little trite (as if the aesthete is only looking for superficial hedonistic fulfillment), but the aesthete may not necessarily be limited to a taste for pleasure. Rather, C. Stephen Evans, one of the U.S.'s leading Kierkegaardian experts at Baylor University, explains, "Kierkegaard places the emphasis on desire itself. What the aesthete wants is simply to have what he or she wants, whatever that might be" (71). In other words, the aesthetes' passion may vary from person to person. Some may want pleasure, others may want pain (72), but collectively they all want that passion to be fulfilled.

Kierkegaard's Johannes the Seducer has his own specific passion: that is seducing young girls, which he does in a so-called "spiritual" sense. In his diary, he describes in detail his thought out plans for deceiving Cordelia, a young impressionable urban woman; he describes it in a curious way, hinting that he is bringing out Cordelia's aesthetic qualities. He is turning her into a type of interesting, poetic work of art. The pleasure that comes from bringing out her artistic nature, and indeed causing her to fall in love with him, is equivalent to "splash[ing] up and down on a stormy lake" (Hannay 37). It is "enjoyable to be stirred in oneself" (37). Although Johannes concerns himself with different desires, there is still that longing to feel strong emotion. He works towards his moment deliberately, purposefully. While different in their specific interests and personalities, Author A and Johannes are examples of the aesthetic life view, in which the individual personally, and often selfishly, satiates their own passionate desires.

Returning once again to Elliott Smith, not only does his "Ballad of Big Nothing" express a kind of aesthetic disappointment with the lack of passion in the world, but other songs in the *Either/Or* album like "Speed Trials," "Pictures of Me," and "Rose Parade" present this sentiment as well. "Speed Trials" begins the album with a quiet, sinister march. His frustrations come out in lyrics that talk about "running back" to a past experience: "running speed trials standing in place." He also references a socket that does not give "a shock enough." Here is a world where electric jolts can't make a person care or feel deeply and where racers only run in the preliminaries without ever getting to the real event. In fact, this character runs the speed trial without actually moving anywhere. If speed trials already felt pointless, surely running one in the same spot makes it even more so. William Todd Schultz, writer of the psychobiography

Torment Saint: The Life of Elliott Smith, sums up the song by saying, “Life’s a speed trial—all preparation and qualification, no race” (88). In “Pictures of Me,” Smith complains about his growing fame, a superficial situation that lacks any real meaning or passion for him. The introductory lines “Start, stop, and start / Stupid acting smart / Flirting with the flicks / Say it’s just for kicks” immediately articulate his disillusionment with people who only act at a surface level. They flirt for fun without anything substantial. When the chorus comes along, Smith switches into a higher tonal key, bringing greater tension and more emotion: “So sick and tired of all these pictures of me / Completely wrong / Totally wrong.” To see his picture around the city (to know that he has gotten more popular) does not by any means fulfill his deep-seated desires. Everyone else is “dying just to get the disease,” which Schultz calls “the big blue screen of fame,” but Smith finds it revolting.

In “Rose Parade” we see even more examples of shallowness. At the parade, a metaphor that for Smith exhibited much ado about nothing, he is asked to “march down the street like the Duracell bunny” and “throw . . . out candy that looks like money.” Like running a speed trial in place, the Duracell bunny has no real point. He uses energy just to use energy. There is no underlying meaning to his existence. And then Smith’s use of candy (one time here and twice in “Ballad of Big Nothing”) is telling as well. Like the bunny or the parade, candy gets a lot of attention, but it hardly sustains a person. It has all the trappings of a lie, of pretending like it is everything you want while hardly offering anything substantial. Interestingly enough, while he listens to the “ridiculous marching band,” he finds himself actually “singing along / With some half-hearted victory song.” Afterwards he asks the listener, “So won’t you follow me down to the Rose Parade?” Smith complains about a world that lacks real and true emotion, deep purpose and passion, but he still finds himself taking part in that lackluster world. He is not only asked to come to the parade, but he asks the listener to follow him there, fully acknowledging his own involvement. Even though he calls the marching band ridiculous, he still ends up singing with them.

Though complaining about the passionless age and involving oneself in it are rather contradictory, that attitude fits firmly within the aesthete’s worldview. At the beginning of the book *Either/Or*, Author A tells us, “I don’t feel like doing anything. I don’t feel like riding—the motion is too powerful; I don’t feel like walking—it is too tiring; I don’t feel like lying down . . . I don’t feel like doing anything” (Hong 38). For someone who complains about others not having passion, he certainly lacks some. Later he laments that there is never any real

purpose in his situation and that such is always the case. “Before me is continually an empty space, and I am propelled by a consequence that lies behind me” (Hong 39). Like Smith, Author A wishes there were some meaning to grasp onto, but is always only confronted with “big nothing,”—which is simply the human condition. He also suggests that maybe frivolity really is the answer to life. If nothingness is one’s lot in life, then nothingness is what one should embrace. “Arbitrariness is the whole secret. It is popularly believed that there is no art to being arbitrary, and yet it takes profound study to be arbitrary in such a way that a person does not himself run wild in it but himself has pleasure from it” (60-61). Like Evans points out, the aesthete is not simply a hedonist, but a very complex personality. The aesthete is often disappointed that there is not more passion, but sometimes takes part in lethargy, or seemingly meaningless activities. The particular desire can take different forms, but whatever the desire is, the aesthete wants it to be fulfilled immediately.

Concern With Time

The second characteristic of the aesthete is his or her concern with time. Since the aesthete mainly focuses on immediately satisfying desire, he or she is also very aware that those fulfilling moments are fleeting. About the aesthete and time, Evans says, “The aesthete lives in and for ‘the moment.’ It is not hard to see why this should be so, for immediate desires have just this momentary character, and to live for the satisfaction of such desires is to seek to make one’s life a series of satisfying moments” (72). Like living for passion, living for the moment has its problems, and the aesthete is all too aware of this. Author A says, “Pleasure disappoints; possibility does not.” Furthermore, if he made one wish, it would not be “for wealth or power but for the passion as possibility, for the eye, eternally young, eternally ardent, that sees possibility everywhere” (43). In other words, possibility is the fountain of eternity. Unlike pleasure, which has an expiration date, possibility never closes. It never limits. It is always available. If Author A could harness that power, he could theoretically reap passion endlessly. However, as it is, his passion-filled moments will only be momentary. Johannes the Seducer also understands the transience of time, which is one of the reasons why he writes his journal at all. Author A, the editor who discovers Johannes’ letters on accident, describes the tone of the diary this way: “Although of course the experience was recorded after it happened--sometimes perhaps

even a considerable time after--it was often described as if taking place at the very moment, so dramatically vivid that sometimes it was as though it was all taking place before one's very eyes" ("Diary" 11). Evidently, Johannes is not just interested in living his moment in the first place, but also wants to "savour . . . his own person aesthetically" in the future. For him, the diary is a way to freeze time. In theory, the future is the fountain of potentiality. The problem of temporality surfaces once again because even the secondary experience expires and like Plato's "mimesis" is still twice removed from the ideal. In the second part of the literary work *Either/Or*, Judge Wilhelm talks about the aesthete's life as one of despair. Alastair Hannay, the British scholar who has provided extensive translations and explanations of Kierkegaard's works, elaborates:

Wilhelm does not mean that the life of the aesthete is especially exposed to disappointment, frustration, and in the end despair [though there certainly is disappointment and frustration, but those qualities can also be found in the other two life stages]; he means that the aesthete is already in despair because he makes so much depend on the moment that life can offer. The aesthete's life is one of despair even when, by the aesthete's lights, everything is going swimmingly. ("Biography" 179)

Wilhelm's point is what the aesthete already knows: life is made meaningful by possessing the moment, but even in possessing it, it is already fading. This attitude is perfectly expressed at the end of *Diary of a Seducer* when Johannes asks, "Why can't a night like that be longer?" (184) He finally got to the moment, and then suddenly it was gone.

This obsession over time, this awareness of our transitory condition, is seen in Smith's songs as well—especially "Speed Trials," "Alameda," and "No Name No. 5." Not only does the chorus of "Speed Trials" talk about meaningless races akin to a hamster spinning in its wheel, he also says, "It's just a brief smile crossing your face." This line is not only sung once, but three times; the repetition of the lyric is not so much quaint as it is grinding. His voice is both quiet, but gravelly—pretty, but coarse. Clearly, this supreme moment has a catch to it: it doesn't last. The smile in "No Name No. 5" doesn't either. "A sweet, sweet smile" is worth singing about, is worth remembering, but it's "fading fast." That fading is completely expected. He does not get "upset about it / No, not anymore / There's nothing wrong / That wasn't wrong before." He has become conditioned to accept that things, moments, and people leave. In fact, at the end of the song he chants, "Everybody's gone at last." For this introvert, the temporality of life

also brings respite. Furthermore, “Alameda” makes a point of singing about a girl who liked you “for one or two minutes”, but then “the fix is in / You’re all pretension.” The disappointment behind the bridge is unmistakable. Not only does it contain the lowest notes melodically, but Smith also incorporates a brief pause where all instruments are silenced for a beat—and just like that the moment is gone. Like the moment-chasing aesthete, Smith longs for the temporary fulfillment of something he knows will dissolve.

Indecision

The last aesthetic characteristic that makes its way into Smith’s album is the lack of real decision-making. The namesake for both works is most directly talked about in “Either/Or: An Ecstatic Discourse” located in the literary work *Either/Or*. The aesthete also loves the artistic consciousness of frames within frames within frames: an “Either/Or” within an Either/Or which contains many more “eithers” and “ors.” In the “Ecstatic Discourse,” Author A wisely expounds, “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” (Hong 43-44). This comical logical sequence is not only talked about with marriage, but also with “laugh[ing] at the stupidities of the world” (43), “trust[ing] a girl,” and “hang[ing] yourself” (44). With this pessimistic view of the world, this passage insists that all decisions will cause disappointment. There is also no preference for one choice over another. No side is good, none better or worse. Each option is equal because both will equally cause regret. If all decisions are equal, then there is no true decision-making.

Kierkegaard’s Johannes seems to feel the same way. Although Johannes certainly schemes about how to ensnare Cordelia, he is not so specifically concerned with her. Rather, she is one option among many, a means to fulfilling his contorted desire. One of his philosophies about love follows thus: “The trick [to deluding the god of love] is to be as receptive in regard to impressions as possible, to know the impression you are making and the impression each girl makes on you. In this way you can even be in love with many at the same time, because with each particular girl you are differently in love. Loving just one is too little” (“Diary” 84). He admits to maintaining multiple options here, to not actually committing to any one person. His actions towards Cordelia certainly

display his belief in keeping the relationship open, distanced, abstract. He makes her “interesting” without fostering a true respect for her as a valued individual. He says their affiliation “amounts to nothing at all” because “it is purely spiritual” (72). He says she is a work of art, a sculpture (151). She is a “woman [who] is the man’s dream” (165). In other words, to him she is a young virgin ready to be manipulated aesthetically just like any other young virgin is ready to be manipulated. If it were not Cordelia, it would be the actress he met at the theater. Judge Wilhelm will even go so far as to say that the aesthete’s nonchalance equates to not making decisions at all. “The esthetic choice is either altogether immediate, and thus no choice, or it loses itself in a great multiplicity... If one does not choose absolutely, one chooses only for the moment and for that reason can choose something else the next moment” (Hong 73). While the aesthete obviously makes some choices, like what he should write in a letter or how he should talk to his lover’s aunt, he is ultimately ambivalent.

Not surprisingly, the aesthete’s “either/or” mentality weaves in and out of Smith’s album as well. Smith exhibits his own ambivalence and not just others’. This is most notable in “Alameda,” “Pictures of Me,” and “Say Yes.” “Alameda” may sound the most like Johannes, as Smith reassures himself that “Nobody broke your heart / You broke your own because you can’t finish what you start / Nobody broke your heart / If you’re alone it must be you that wants to be apart.” Just as Johannes decides to emotionally distance himself from Cordelia by insisting the dissolution of their engagement was his plan all along (175), Smith takes full responsibility for the break up. Smith and the girl he’s singing about can be together or not together. He could choose either way, and in the end he is resolved to accept whatever happens with equal emotion. In “Pictures of Me” Smith asks, after seeing his image on television, “I’m not surprised at all and really why should I be? / See nothing wrong / See nothing wrong.” Then moments later he complains, “So sick and tired of all these pictures of me / Completely wrong / Totally wrong.” The lyrics reveal his attempt to straddle two different attitudes. On the one hand, fame is not necessarily a bad thing; maybe it is simply to be expected. On the other hand, fame is not the answer to his problems, and he feels very uncomfortable embracing the popularity anyway. In the end, his conclusion remains ambiguous. He presents an either/or dilemma, one that will most likely cause regret on both sides.

“Say Yes” also shows Smith’s inability to make decisions. Interestingly, the song starts with the lyrics, “I’m in love with the world through the eyes of a girl.” Instead of saying he is in love with the girl, he sings that he is in love with

the world; she is the one who provides that perspective for him. In a similar vein Johannes writes to Cordelia: “Behind every tree I see a womanly being that resembles you . . . Is not loving you to love a world?” (“Diary” 129). And again he states, “It is my love for you casting its reflection over the whole of life” (138). Being in love is not only a personal experience, but an abstract, aesthetic one as well. Any girl could stir up these thoughts, to turn the whole world into a metaphor. Smith also clearly sets up a dialectic; the girl will choose to be in a relationship with him or she won’t. “It’s always been wait and see,” “She’ll decide what she wants / I’ll probably be the last to know / No one says until it shows and you see how it is / They want your or they don’t / Say yes” (Smith). He is not begging her, convincing her, or proving which choice is better. Although we assume he genuinely wants this girl (the instrumentals are stripped, revealing, and the melody is optimistic), he is prepared to accept either possibility. In fact, his allusion to “they” instead of a specific girl generalizes the situation. Similarly, Johannes will often discuss girls or women, rather than individuals. Of course, this is not to say that Elliott Smith is Johannes. Many people can attest to the fact that Smith was a likeable figure, an authentic, deeply caring person (Nugent 7). After pouring over the lyrics of *Either/Or* and the diapsalmata of Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*, clearly there is a great deal of philosophical overlap.

Finally, whether Smith meant to deliberately engage Kierkegaard’s version of the aesthete in this album is questionable. Smith only mentions in interviews where the title came from and never elaborates on why he chose it. However, the philosophical work seems to have deeply resonated with Smith on multiple levels, which is evident through the many similarities in his songs. Certainly he admired Kierkegaard; this may simply be a tribute to those angsty, anxiety-laden works. Or, perhaps it was more personal. While reading *Either/Or*, Smith saw the aesthete in himself. If so, then he was doing exactly what Kierkegaard wanted him to do: to struggle, to find his own meaning, to read himself into the works. Perhaps Smith not only saw himself in Author A or Johannes, but also in Kierkegaard, who was after all a literary, poetic writer—in truth, an aesthete. Surely Elliott Smith was not, as some seem to suggest, admiring Kierkegaard from afar, but seriously engaging in these existentialist philosophies. By recognizing the influence of Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*, we more fully understand Smith’s vision of modernity—a frustrated glance into his passionless, temporal, ambiguous world.

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