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Author(s): Bridget Alsdorf

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Hammershøi's Either/Or

Bridget Alsdorf

In 1900 a critic pronounced that the work of the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864–1916) “leaves the soul unsatisfied.”¹ For this writer some spiritual uncertainty in the artist’s pictures makes the viewer restless. Their aesthetic elegance lacks clear and satisfying meaning. Five years later the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, captivated by Hammershøi’s art, abandoned his project of writing about it after a year of deliberation because he did not feel “adequately prepared, initiated, permeated, to be able to produce the kind of work, conveying the essence of this priceless master with total conviction, that I was aiming at.”² While the critic blamed the paintings for his “unsatisfied” soul, Rilke found fault in himself for not taking adequate

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1. Quoted in Frederikke Hammershøi, *Scrapbooks*, 4 vol. (1885–1914), 3:45.

2. Rainer Maria Rilke, letter to Alfred Bramsen, 10 Nov. 1905, in Poul Vad, *Vilhelm Hammershøi and Danish Art at the Turn of the Century*, trans. Kenneth Tindall (New Haven, Conn., 1992), p. 405. For a fuller interpretation of Rilke’s failure to write about Hammershøi’s work, see Anne Hemkendreis, “The Essence of Things: Hammershøi as Seen Through the Eyes of Rainer Maria Rilke,” in *Hammershøi and Europe*, ed. Kasper Monrad (Munich, 2012), pp. 165–79.

time to let the work “permeate” him. Both were looking for something in Hammershøi’s work that it refuses to supply, whether some form of spiritual serenity or a metaphysical essence that unifies his oeuvre. Indeed, Hammershøi seems determined to unsettle any sense of satisfaction or conviction, and it is the writings of his compatriot Søren Kierkegaard that best articulate the philosophical significance of his challenge.

Interest in Kierkegaard’s work picked up considerably in the late nineteenth century,³ at the same time that Hammershøi settled on the domestic interior—a leitmotif of the philosopher’s oeuvre—as the primary subject of his art. Born in Copenhagen, Hammershøi received a thorough academic training, but he forged his reputation as a founding member of *Den Frie Udstilling* (The Free Exhibition) in 1891 after several of his paintings were rejected by Denmark’s academic jury. He spent most of his life in his native city painting the interiors of two consecutively owned apartments on Strandgade, a harborside street in the seventeenth-century neighborhood of Christianshavn. Although he was notoriously reserved in conversation and no more forthcoming in his letters, we know that he craved the quiet and solitude of his home whenever he was away—not least because he felt that it was the best place for him to paint—and devoted himself to cultivating the spare aesthetic of his domestic space in reality and in representation.⁴ His painted interiors, which have come to stand for the inward turn of Danish art and literature in the 1890s, are appreciated for their aesthetic rigor, contemplative calm, austere tonalities, and brooding atmospheric effects. In particular, their intense inwardness—both spatial and psychological—gives striking form to the melancholic ambivalence of Kierkegaard’s dialectical tour de force *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life* (1843).⁵

3. See Steen Tullberg, “Denmark: The Permanent Reception—150 Years of Reading Kierkegaard,” in *Kierkegaard’s International Reception*, ed. John Stewart (Burlington, Vt., 2009), p. 18.

4. For Hammershøi’s (limited and laconic) correspondence, in which he refers multiple times to his longing for home and his greater comfort in painting there, see Hammershøi Archive, Hirschprung Collection, Copenhagen. My thanks to Niels Henriksen for his help in translating these letters.

5. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 2 vols. (Princeton, N.J., 1987); hereafter abbreviated *E*. Citations will be from this edition unless otherwise noted. On occasion I choose to cite the abridged edition by Alastair Hannay when I believe Hannay’s translation to be superior.

BRIDGET ALSDORF is associate professor in the Department of Art and Archaeology at Princeton University. She is the author of *Fellow Men: Fantin-Latour and the Problem of the Group in Nineteenth-Century French Painting* (2012) and articles on Bonnard, Cézanne, Degas, Manet, Poussin, and Vallotton.

Hammershøi owned a rare first edition of *Either/Or*, along with six other first editions of Kierkegaard's works.⁶ His collection suggests an interest in the philosopher's deliberations on the aesthetic life vis-à-vis the ethical and the religious, on the inherent double-mindedness of humanity, on different forms of love, on problems of nineteenth-century Danish society (especially the Lutheran Church), and on the complexities of authorship. His interiors share a philosophical foundation with these debates, both in their reliance on repetition as an artistic strategy and in their implicit critique of aesthetic disinterest as a guiding aim of art and life.⁷

To be clear, I do not wish to argue that Hammershøi's reading of Kierkegaard informed his artistic practice. Although this is possible (even likely), it is impossible to prove and unnecessary to the argument I mean to pursue. What I intend to show is that Hammershøi's paintings are philosophical, demonstrating a Kierkegaardian vision of mind that is existential in temper, and that seeing them in this way allows their full semantic complexity to emerge. Viewers of Hammershøi's work are presented with a choice or, more often, a series of choices that seem to have profound implications for their point of view on art and everyday life. These choices concern people and things, human relationships and spatial ones, and can be both literal and metaphorical. They take various forms. For example, sometimes the relative orientation and accessibility of human figures imply alternative points of view. Hammershøi's figures, when they appear, often face away from the viewer, as if absorbed in something that the viewer cannot share,⁸ but sometimes he depicts them in profile or front-

6. For the auction catalogue of Hammershøi's library, see *Fortegnelse over Vilhelm Hammershøi's Bogsamling* (Copenhagen, 1916), pp. 25–26. At 1,052 volumes, Hammershøi's library was not especially noteworthy in size, but it was consistently high in quality. His Kierkegaard collection included *Either/Or* (Copenhagen, 1843); *Stages on Life's Way* (Copenhagen, 1845); *Two Ages: A Literary Review* (Copenhagen, 1846); *Works of Love* (Copenhagen, 1847); *Edifying Discourses in Diverse Spirits* (Copenhagen, 1847); *S. Kierkegaard's Newspaper Articles*, ed. Rasmusen Nielsen (Copenhagen, 1857); and *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* (Copenhagen, 1859).

7. The Hammershøi-Kierkegaard connection has tempted others. Poul Vad has compared the artist's insistence on individual isolation and subjectivity to Kierkegaard's existentialism but prefaces the claim by calling it an "over-interpretation" (Vad, *Vilhelm Hammershøi and Danish Art at the Turn of the Century*, p. 384). Naoki Sato has linked the representation of profound unease in Hammershøi's work to Kierkegaard via Henrik Ibsen as a distinctly Scandinavian theme but, like Vad, does not pursue the connection; see Naoki Sato, "The Quotidian View without Narrative: Connections and Separations between the Interior Paintings of Vilhelm Hammershøi and Seventeenth-Century Dutch Interior Paintings," in *Hammershøi*, ed. Felix Krämer, Sato, and Anne-Birgitte Fonsmark (London, 2008), p. 43.

8. Many of Hammershøi's paintings are absorptive in this way, showing figures immersed in quiet domestic activities such as reading, sewing, or playing the piano, often viewed from behind. Michael Fried's important historical and theoretical studies of absorption as a central preoccupation of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century painting have significantly informed this

facing, and on the rare occasions when he paints multi-figure compositions, the figures are distinguished from each other primarily by their relative position vis-à-vis the viewer.⁹ Second, Hammershøi's paintings regularly offer viewers the possibility of different paths or perspectives as routes through interior space. A wide-open door leading to an enfilade of rooms is a common motif in his interiors, as is the juxtaposition of two open doors or of one open door and one closed. *Interior with a Woman Standing* (1905) typifies these compositional devices, with a woman seen from behind apparently caught in the moment of deciding which door to pass through (fig. 1). Third, the artist favored compositions that align streaming sun and dark shadows, creating striking juxtapositions of different levels of light. And fourth, his works often reference different forms of aesthetic experience: a piano for music, books for literature, and framed pictures for art. Taken together, these various aesthetic alternatives draw the viewer into Hammershøi's meditation on the domestic interior as a space of inward reflection, self-formation, and engaged decision. By involving his viewers in these psychologically charged scenes, Hammershøi makes it impossible to experience his paintings in the cool, disinterested way they initially seem to invite.

My argument draws on two sections of *Either/Or* that illuminate Hammershøi's double-sided view on domestic life: "Shadowgraphs" from part 1, written from the perspective of the fictive young aesthete A, and "The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage" from part 2, written from the perspective of A's (also fictive) interlocutor, the ethical Judge William. While part 1 promotes the aesthetic way of life, defending amusement, sensual pleasure, and poetic flights of imagination over and against ethical considerations, part 2 argues for the value—both aesthetic and spiritual—of a life grounded in ethics, faith, and the ordinary, a life that finds its fullest expression in the durational temporality of marriage. Hammershøi's paintings do not overtly address moral or theological questions, but they are built on a Kierkegaardian vision of the domestic interior as a profound metaphor for individual subjectivity.

A painting like *Interior with Woman at Piano, Strandgade 30* (1901) epitomizes the fundamental tension of Hammershøi's interiors between the

essay. See, among other works, Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley, 1988) and Menzel's *Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (New Haven, 2002). Fried's discussion of Kierkegaard in Menzel's *Realism*, to which I will refer later, has also impacted my inquiry in vital ways.

9. See, for example, Hammershøi, *Two Figures (The Artist and His Wife)* (1898) and *Five Portraits* (1901–02).



FIGURE 1. Vilhelm Hammershøi, *Interior with a Woman Standing*, ca. 1905, oil on canvas, 55 x 46 cm, private collection.

austere routine of everyday life, as he conceived it, and the sensuous pleasure and psychological absorption of art (fig. 2). Hammershøi shaped his artistic practice around the merger of these two poles; for him, domestic life was defined by the coexistence of inward withdrawal and prosaic activity, of reflective interiority and mere existence in physical space. This interior is one of his most geometrically complex compositions, with a profusion of corners, intersecting lines, and rectangular enclosures that fix the figure of his wife, Ida, in space. The softly blurred, circular shape of Ida's head fills the narrow space between two horizontal lines—the top



FIGURE 2. Hammershøi, *Interior with Woman at Piano*, Strandgade 30, 1901, oil on canvas, 55.9 x 45.1 cm, private collection.

edge of a piece of sheet music and the bottom edge of a picture frame. By not allowing her head, or even a tendril of her hair, to overlap the edge of the frame—the abutment is unnervingly precise—Hammershøi insists on the strict delimitation of her body and mind, but he also grants her considerable privacy in her domestic role. Since we cannot see her hands it is impossible to know whether music fills the arid space of the room; perhaps she has paused for a moment of quiet thought. The works of art above the

piano, like the sheet music, are effaced, echoing the blankness of the wall behind. Hammershøi is characteristically selective in his attention to detail, lavishing great care on the creases in the tablecloth and the brass fittings of the lamp while blending the piano keys together as a thin strip of cream-colored paint and rendering the pictures on the walls as plain rectangles of mottled gray. This differential focus can be disorienting, with crisp details sharpening our attention and vague areas diffusing or deflecting it away. The result is an oscillation between realist precision and enigmatic abstraction, with the abstraction reserved for objects referencing music and art. Hammershøi's omissions are skeptical, emphasizing the impossibility of knowing another mind by blocking the viewer from Ida's aesthetic experience and likewise suggesting that he could not share this level of experience with his wife.¹⁰ And yet these omissions inscribed across his surfaces are markers of another mode of access, one not beholden to the claims of knowledge. The striking repetition of motifs, and most centrally Ida herself, in Hammershøi's interiors (he painted upwards of seventy domestic interior scenes, approximately half of which feature her) suggests an effort to acknowledge her and their domestic life together via repeated, habitual acts of aesthetic awareness.

Seen from behind seated at the piano, Ida is hemmed in by multiple devices of spatial compression: the empire chair and the sheet music on the piano envelop her black-clad form in white, while a prominent table draped in a crisp white cloth stands right behind her, close enough to make it difficult for her to stand up. By pushing the table against the chair in this way, Hammershøi makes it possible to see the chair as facing two directions simultaneously: toward the piano as a support for Ida and toward the viewer as a seat at the table, for someone who will soon be served some kind of meal. (Logically, we know that the chair's proper orientation is toward the piano because Ida is clearly seated, but this does not prevent the eye from seeing the alternative possibility.) This visual trick increases the sense of compression between the piano and the table by collapsing the distance between them into one Janus-like screen. It also renders the chair an ingenious figure for the dualities that define Hammershøi's interiors—dualities of absorption and deflection, openness and concealment, passage and

10. The illegibility of the sheet music parallels that of the books women are often portrayed reading in nineteenth-century interior scenes, including other works by Hammershøi. According to Kathryn Brown, this illegibility was a typical means of stimulating and frustrating the viewer's curiosity, raising questions "about the imaginative independence enjoyed by individuals whose minds and bodies elude classification" (Kathryn Brown, *Women Readers in French Painting, 1870–1890: A Space for the Imagination* [Burlington, Vt., 2012], p. 6).

blockage—forcing the viewer to consider both possibilities for the chair's orientation in a single view.

Ultimately, the painting proposes the sensuous experience of music and art only to foreclose them for the viewer, blocking our access to Ida's music and the artworks in front of her. At the same time, Hammershøi offers another remarkable symbol of sensuous experience in the dish of butter placed squarely in the center of the table, as if displacing the lush melody and pictorial substance eclipsed elsewhere into this rich yellow mound. This is the only painting in Hammershøi's oeuvre to feature any form of food, and the choice of butter—bright and unctuous, with no defined shape—is especially remarkable given the austerity and geometry of his aesthetic.¹¹ He offers no context for the hunk of butter other than the two jarringly empty bowls beside it presumably waiting to be filled. Rather than an accessory to a meal, this butter is the main event, a vivid marker of the sensual appetites otherwise hidden in Hammershøi's rooms. The table is both a barrier blocking access to Ida and an invitation to the viewer to sit down with her and eat. Its arrangement is as inscrutable as the sheet music, the framed pictures, and Ida herself.

Shadowgraphs¹²

In "Shadowgraphs," the fourth section of part 1 of *Either/Or*, which voices the views of the young aesthete A, Kierkegaard grapples with a central problem of visual art: how to bring the inner life of a person into view. This is a tremendous challenge in any form of representation, especially in the static forms of painting and sculpture¹³ and even more so when the inner life in question is defined by sadness rather than joy. While "joy wishes to disclose itself," sorrow is "inclosingly reserved [*indeskuttet*], silent, solitary, and seeks to return into itself" (*E*, 1:169). "Reflective sorrow," in particular—by which Kierkegaard means sorrow that is actively con-

11. Even *A Baker's Shop* (1889) eliminates all traces of the baker's ingredients, focusing on the spare geometry of bare shelves, pristine countertops, and gleaming wall tiles. A preparatory study, *From a Bakery Shop* (1888), presents a fuller view of the shop with two figures, but likewise there is no visible food.

12. Here I adopt the translation for *Skyggerids* (literally "shadow outlines") by Hannay and others, rather than "Silhouettes" used in the Hong translation, because it preserves the importance of light and shadow to the idea; see Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. Alastair Hannay, ed. Victor Eremita (New York, 1992), pp. 163–208; hereafter abbreviated *EO*.

13. In this section of Kierkegaard's text, the terms *art*, *artist*, and *artistic* refer to painting and sculpture, following Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's distinction in *Laokoon, oder, über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766); see *E*, 1:169, 631 n. 6. The "Shadowgraphs" essay continues the theme developed in the previous essay, "The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama," in which Kierkegaard explores whether inner psychological states can be conveyed in the theater via dramatic reenactment; see *E*, 1:137–64.

templated and lacking an apparent, well-defined object for its pain¹⁴—is “constantly in motion,” as if pacing back and forth within the interior of the mind and offering “at most only a suggestion” of itself in a person’s outward appearance (E, 1:170).¹⁵ The sorrowful person’s need for privacy and intense reflection erases the emotion’s exterior signs: “even in the first moment [reflective sorrow] hurries inward, and only the more careful observer has an intimation of its disappearance” (E, 1:170).

Artists are at a particular disadvantage in the representation of reflective sorrow because it “lacks repose”; refusing “to rest in any one definite expression,” it “does not lie within spatial categories” (E, 1:170). And yet A’s descriptions of reflective sorrow are remarkably spatial, using vivid visual analogies to convey their inward agitation: “Like a squirrel in its cage, it turns around in itself. . . . Just as the patient in his pain tosses from one side to the other, so reflective sorrow is tossed about in order to find its object and its expression” (E, 1:170; see also 1:631 n. 16). After these introductory paragraphs arguing for the unfeasibility of sorrow’s representation in art, A states that “it is this reflective sorrow that I aim to single out and, as far as possible, have emerge in a few pictures” (E, 1:172). *Picturing* sorrow, and the modes of reflection it engenders, is what Kierkegaard’s aesthete tries to do, over and against his own claim of its theoretical impossibility, a turn that not only confirms A’s status as an aesthete through and through but also suggests how uncertain Kierkegaard was—or wanted his readers to believe he was—about art’s ability to convey the nature of grief. The sketches A offers are descriptive psychological analyses of three female characters in great works of literature and opera—Marie Beaumarchais in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Clavigo*, Donna Elvira in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, and Margaret in Goethe’s *Faust*—all of whom suffer from betrayed love. After relaying their tales to his audience, A apologizes for holding his listeners’ “attention too long on these pictures, all the more so because, however much I have said, nothing visible has appeared to you.” His promise of pictures turns out to be a “fraudulence” caused by the elusive, inward nature of sorrow (E, 1:214).

14. “The point in reflective sorrow is that the sorrow is continually seeking its object; this seeking is the sorrow’s restlessness and its life” (E, 1:178; see also 1:189–90).

15. “Seeking its way thus inwards, it finds at last an enclosure, an innermost recess, where it thinks it can stay, and now it begins its monotonous movement. Like the pendulum in a clock it swings back and forth and cannot find rest. . . . Finally a certain equilibrium emerges. The need for sorrow to break through, to whatever extent it may on occasion have expressed itself, ceases to exist; the exterior is calm and composed, and deep inside, in its little nook, sorrow lives like a well-guarded prisoner in an underground gaol, where it spends year after year in its monotonous movement, walking back and forth in its by-chamber, never wearying of putting sorrow’s long or short road behind it” (EO, p. 170).

Hammershøi was fascinated by the same question of art's capacity to represent interiority, in particular the relationship between psychological states and the domestic interiors that cultivate them.¹⁶ Again, this is an extreme challenge for a static, pictorial art, but Hammershøi pursued it consistently throughout his career, and the shadowgraph metaphor helps to illuminate how. *Skyggerids* literally means "shadow outlines" and has been translated as both "shadowgraphs" and "silhouettes," but A's description suggests that Kierkegaard had something specific in mind:

If I pick up a [shadowgraph], I have no impression of it, cannot arrive at an actual conception of it; only when I hold it up toward the wall and do not look at it directly but at what appears on the wall, only then do I see it. So it is also with the picture I want to show here, an interior picture that does not become perceptible until I see through the exterior. Perhaps there is nothing striking about the exterior, but when I look through it, only then do I discover the interior picture, which is what I want to show, an interior picture that is too delicate to be externally perceptible, since it is woven from the soul's faintest moods. If I look at a sheet of paper, it perhaps has nothing remarkable about it for immediate inspection, but as soon as I hold it up to the light of day and look through it, I discover the subtle interior picture, too psychical, as it were, to be seen immediately. [E, 1:173]

This explanation suggests that a shadowgraph—in Kierkegaard's conception—involved some kind of object, something that can be picked up, held toward the wall, and seen through, perhaps (if we follow the description quite literally) a piece of paper with a seemingly abstract cutout design that, when light passes through it, casts a shadow of unexpected representational shape. This "interior picture" can only be seen when *released from* or *projected out of* its material container—the physical boundaries of a piece of paper—by rays of light. This projection of an otherwise hidden

16. This relationship is central to "The Seducer's Diary," the most well known section of *Either/Or*, but Hammershøi's interiors are fundamentally different from the interior described there in appearance and temper, lacking the rich carpets, window mirrors, bell ropes, and flower-shaped lamps that make up the seducer's interior landscape. For an analysis of Kierkegaard's conception of the nineteenth-century interior as presented in "The Seducer's Diary," see Theodor Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, 1989), pp. 40–46, in which Adorno offers a close reading of a passage describing the apartment of the seducer's victim, Cordelia, as "the key to Kierkegaard's entire oeuvre" (p. 42). Adorno sees the interior as "polemically the equivalent of Kierkegaard's 'subjective thinker'" and a space where "the self is overwhelmed in its own domain by commodities and their historical essence" (pp. 43, 44). This conception of the Kierkegaardian interior—focused on the aesthete's view in *Either/Or*—is different from the one I wish to propose vis-à-vis Hammershøi's work.

image renders it *exterior* and thereby more immediately perceptible, at least enough to provide a “conception of it.” As such, the shadowgraph is a striking (and appropriately dark) metaphor for the complex relationship between the psychological interior and physical exterior of a person. Yet towards the end of the passage Kierkegaard seems to be describing a watermark rather than a cutout, which does not cast a shadow *beyond itself* so much as appear more distinctly *in itself* when light passes through it. This confusion—perhaps deliberate—in his description only increases the rhetorical oscillation between exterior and interior that he uses the shadowgraph metaphor to convey.¹⁷ Indeed, *Skyggerids* was a term used by nineteenth-century authors for any kind of shadow image registered on a surface or for a drawn or incised silhouette that only registers the outline of a person or thing.¹⁸ Key to its figurative meaning was an element of vagueness or incompleteness, a connotation Kierkegaard uses to explore the impossibility of seeing or picturing another person's interior state.¹⁹

This description of the shadowgraph speaks to the essentially philosophical nature of Hammershøi's enterprise: his way of exploring interiority via exterior surfaces, the elusive and psychological via the graphic and immediately perceptible, with “the light of day” as the key ingredient for teasing out, even if only by contrast, “the soul's faintest moods.” More specifically, a stunning parallel to the shadowgraph metaphor is a series of paintings Hammershøi made between 1900 and 1909 showing light flooding through a latticed window in a side-wing parlor of his Strandgade apartment.²⁰ Likely the most well-known of these works is the first, *Dust Motes Dancing in the Sunbeams* (1900), depicting the room void of furniture with light streaming through the window in a prismatic fan of lilac-white rays that cast a graphic shadow on the floor (fig. 3). The shadow is an “interior picture” refracted inside the apartment, repeating the geometric

17. On deliberate incoherence as a rhetorical strategy in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works, see James Conant, “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense,” in *Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam (Lubbock, Tex., 1992), pp. 195–224 and “Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and the Point of View for Their Work as Authors,” in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, ed. Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr (New York, 1996), pp. 248–331.

18. See *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog 1700–1950*, ed. H. Juul-Jensen et al., vol. 19 (Copenhagen, 1940), s.v. “Skyggerids,” ordnet.dk/ods/ordbog?query=sygygerids. My thanks to Niels Henriksen for his help in translating this definition.

19. Remarkably, Kierkegaard's translators and commentators have not questioned the meaning of the term as it is used in this crucial passage. The Hong translation offers an etymological translation of *Skyggerids* as, “literally, ‘shadow outlines’” (E, p. 631 n. 9) but no historical discussion and no commentary on their choice to translate it as “silhouettes.”

20. See room 6 in the floor plan of the apartment at Strandgade 30, Copenhagen, in Krämer, “Vilhelm Hammershøi: The Poetry of Silence,” in *Hammershøi*, fig. 2, p. 14.



FIGURE 3. Hammershøi, *Sunbeams* (*Sunlight [Dust Motes Dancing in the Sunbeams]*), 1900, oil on canvas, 70 x 59 cm, Ordupgaard Museum, Copenhagen. Photograph: Anders Sune Berg.

pattern of the glass at a raking angle, and it is notably incomplete; most of the top half of the window's reflection as well as sections of the bottom half are cropped by the edge of the canvas or are simply not there. The cropping emphasizes the sharp angle at which the light enters the room, casting the shadow well off to the side with much of it stretching off frame. By aligning this shadow with the dark, tightly closed door—also marked by internal rectangles that subdivide its long vertical shape—Hammershøi plays with the oscillation between openness and closure, light and dark, transparency and opacity, immediacy and dilation that make this simple painting a brilliant meditation on interior space as a metaphor for what painting can

do: namely, telescope the world into a rectangular frame, alter it at will, and infuse it with psychological significance.

The window glass is ostensibly transparent but only seven of its twenty-four sections can be seen through, and what lies beyond is not the outside world but rather the façade of the opposite wing of the apartment across an interior courtyard. These sunbeams have passed through a series of interiors and frames—an echo chamber of enclosures—before reaching their final shape on the floor. Most of the window appears clouded by the dazzling passage of light, an obscurity redoubled by the refracted sun patches rendered in opaque ivory paint. But to fully appreciate the significance of the shadowgraph metaphor in *Dust Motes* we must look at the artist's multiple variations on the theme, the majority of which include a solitary human figure. Of the ten versions of the composition in Hammershøi's oeuvre, four have no figures while the other six each feature a singularly important person in his life: his mother, his brother, or (most often) his wife. The artist shifted back and forth between the empty and inhabited versions of the composition, but all of the paintings display Hammershøi's painterly fascination with shadows, and all have a deeply reflective quality, inviting viewers to project themselves into their metaphors of interiority with the window as an abstracting prism between exterior and interior worlds.

Woman Reading in Sunlight, Strandgade 30 (1900) shows a similar composition to *Dust Motes* but with the addition of the artist's mother Frederikke seated facing toward the window and reading, as well as a pair of drawn curtains and a picture hanging on the wall (fig. 4). Compared to *Dust Motes*, the interior shadow falls closer to the window in this picture, just inches from Frederikke's feet, with its warming patches of sun set in stark contrast to the black, floor-length drape of her dress. The painting thematizes opacity and obscurity in virtually every element of its composition: Frederikke's lost profile, the illegibility of her book, her white cap and cloak-like garment, the murky gray abstraction framed above her head, the shadows on the floor, the impossibly tight seal of the door, and, of course, the window itself whose drawn curtains reveal clouded glass that offers very little view of what is outside. As in *Dust Motes*, the window is an interface of transparency and obscurity, allowing a clarifying light to pass through while blocking view of the external world. Also as in *Dust Motes*, the shadowgraph on the floor redoubles this obscurity in the rich opacity of its brushstrokes (and it does this all the more remarkably in that its referent is a window), serving as an emblem of the painting's emphasis on the interior in both the spatial and psychological sense.



FIGURE 4. Hammershøi, *Woman Reading in Sunlight*, Strandgade 30, 1901, oil on canvas, 46.5 x 51.5 cm, private collection.

Two versions featuring Ida dated 1901 largely repeat the composition with Hammershøi's mother but with the addition of a table and different arrangements of the pictures on the wall (figs. 5–6). It is significant, however, that one of these works—the Detroit picture—offers a clear view of Ida's face illuminated by the window.²¹ This is in contrast to the rest of the paintings in the series that obscure the face or eliminate figures entirely. In the next variation, *The Coin Collector* (1904), Hammershøi repeats this composition with his brother Svend sitting in front of the same window closely examining a coin in his hands (fig. 7). Yet here Svend is just as obscure as if he were turned away, with all but a tiny section of his face cast in dark shadow. One of Hammershøi's very few nocturnal paintings, its only light source is two candles doubled in a reflection behind Svend's head. This reflection is an inversion of the shadowgraph motif in the other five paintings, with light passing through the window from interior to

21. See figure 6.

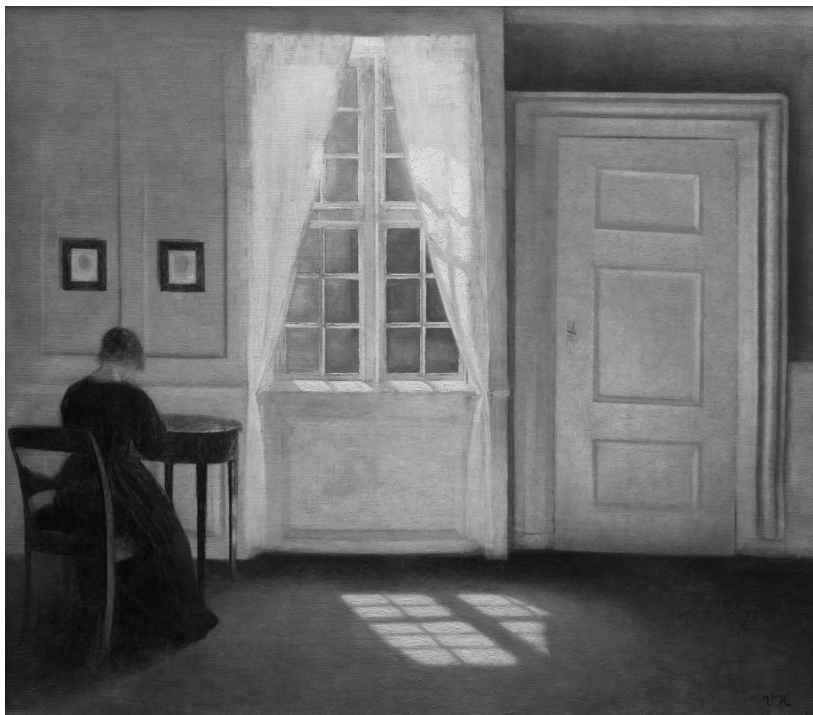


FIGURE 5. Hammershøi, *Interior in Strandgade, Sunlight on the Floor*, 1901, oil on canvas, 46.5 x 52 cm, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.

exterior rather than the other way around, and the reflection appearing to hover *outside* the apartment like a subtle signal-flare of human activity. Svend's orientation away from the window further emphasizes this version's unqualified interiority, and the dramatic nocturnal lighting suggests a more romantic and furtive image of solitary contemplation. *The Coin Collector* presents inwardness as absolute, but Hammershøi modernized this romantic view in subsequent variations. Indeed, in all of the daylight versions painted between 1900 and 1909, as in his oeuvre overall, Hammershøi exposes the romantic interior to the clarifying light of day.²² The passage of natural light into and throughout his private space was central to his realist vision of interiority, but unlike the seventeenth-century Dutch genre scenes that inspired him they are stripped of all narrative or

22. This romantic interior was similar to the kind Kierkegaard warns his readers against in "The Seducer's Diary" in part 1 of *Either/Or*. On Kierkegaard's critique of German Romanticism, see Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy, 1760–1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 345–55.



FIGURE 6. Hammershøi, *Interior with a Lady*, 1901, oil on canvas, 54.9 x 53 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts, Museum Purchase, Robert H. Tannahill Foundation Fund / Bridgeman Images.

anecdotal detail,²³ leaving the viewer to find meaning in more abstract elements of composition and mood.

In three versions from around 1906 Hammershøi tried the composition in daylight again, this time painting one version with Ida and two without (figs. 8–10). The Tate’s canvas features the edge of a table covered in a white tablecloth at left,²⁴ and the original, uncropped version included Ida stand-

23. Monrad has written about this in “Stories That are Not Told: The Narrative Element in Hammershøi’s Art,” in *Symbolism in Danish and European Painting, 1870–1910*, ed. Peter Nørgaard Larsen (Copenhagen, 2000), pp. 245–57.

24. See figure 10.



FIGURE 7. Hammershøi, *The Coin Collector*, 1904, oil on canvas, 89 x 69.5 cm, The National Museum of Art, Architecture, and Design, Oslo, NG.M.02273. Photograph by Jacques Lathion.

ing between the table and the wall.²⁵ Although the cropped section of the canvas is significantly damaged (figs. 11–12), Ida's orientation toward the viewer is discernible, making this painting an anomaly in the series along

25. The original composition is described in the *catalogue raisonné* of Hammershøi's work as follows: "To the left is a table with a white tablecloth, which is cut by the edge of the frame, and further, a woman in black standing between the table and the wall at the back. The owner



FIGURE 8. Hammershøi, *Moonlight, Strandgade 30*, 1900–1906, oil on canvas, 41 x 51.1 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, European Paintings Funds, and Annette de la Renta Gift, 2012.

with the Detroit interior.²⁶ Both of the interiors dated firmly to 1906,²⁷ and the Tate's canvas in particular, show uncharacteristic architectural distortion, with the door appearing to slant sideways away from the window, sitting crooked in its frame. (The removal of hinges and doorknob in the Copenhagen picture—more typical of the artist—adds another unsettling effect.)²⁸ In both paintings, it is as if the room itself has physically absorbed its inhabitants' unease, and perhaps it was the combination of this distortion and Ida's somber figure that prompted Hammershøi's British patron to hide her away.

[Leonard Borwick] has folded the canvas back so that the figure is unseen, as it did not seem to him to equalize with the other parts of the picture" (Sophus Michaëlis and Alfred Bramsen, *Vilhelm Hammershøi* [Copenhagen, 1918], p. 105). A reproduction of the painting from 1909 (titled *The Quiet Room*) already shows the painting in its current state, so Borwick's alteration must have happened soon after it was finished; see *The Studio* 47 (1909): 256.

26. See figure 6.

27. See figures 9 and 10.

28. See figure 9.

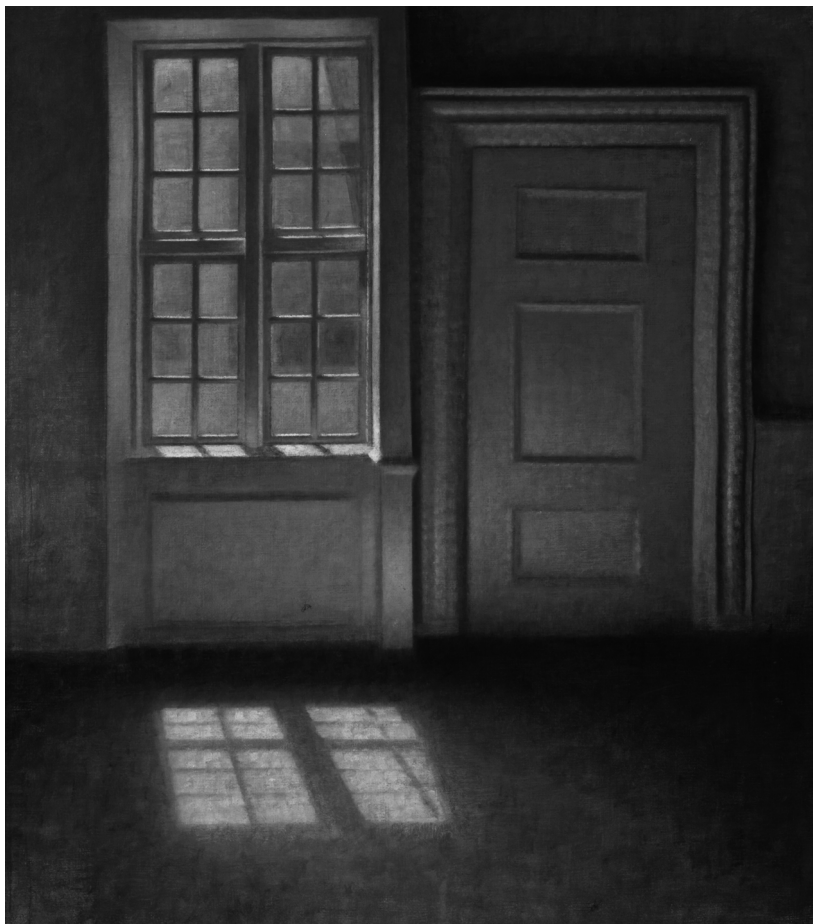


FIGURE 9. Hammershøi, *Study in Sunlight*, 1906, oil on canvas, 54.5 x 46.5, The David Collection, Copenhagen, B312. Photograph by Pernille Klemp.

Interior, Strandgade 30 (1909), featuring Ida, may be the culminating work in the series and is the strongest pictorial expression of a Kierkegaardian metaphors of inwardness (fig. 13).²⁹ In this late version, unlike those featuring Frederikke and Svend, Ida appears to have nothing

29. The ninth painting in the series, *Woman in an Interior*, in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, has also been dated to 1909. My thanks to Julia Welch for providing information on this work's provenance and research history. Similar to figures 5 and 13, this painting depicts Ida from behind seated at a table to the left of the window, but its facture is less refined and it is murkier in tone.



FIGURE 10. Hammershøi, *Interior, Sunlight on the Floor*, 1906, oil on canvas, 51.8 x 44 cm, Tate Gallery, London. Photograph © Tate, London 2014.

to occupy her in the empty room. She stares at the empty wall in front of her enveloped in shadow, while to her right the window casts its latticed outline in the center of the floor. In an extraordinary detail, Hammershøi extends the gray vertical line marking the wooden spine of the window's left panes past the windowsill (where the line is legible as shadow) and down the lower panel of the wall (where no such naturalistic explanation exists), connecting the window directly—*materially*—to its interior reflection on the floor. In doing this Hammershøi literally draws the passage between object and shadow, exterior light and interior image, with

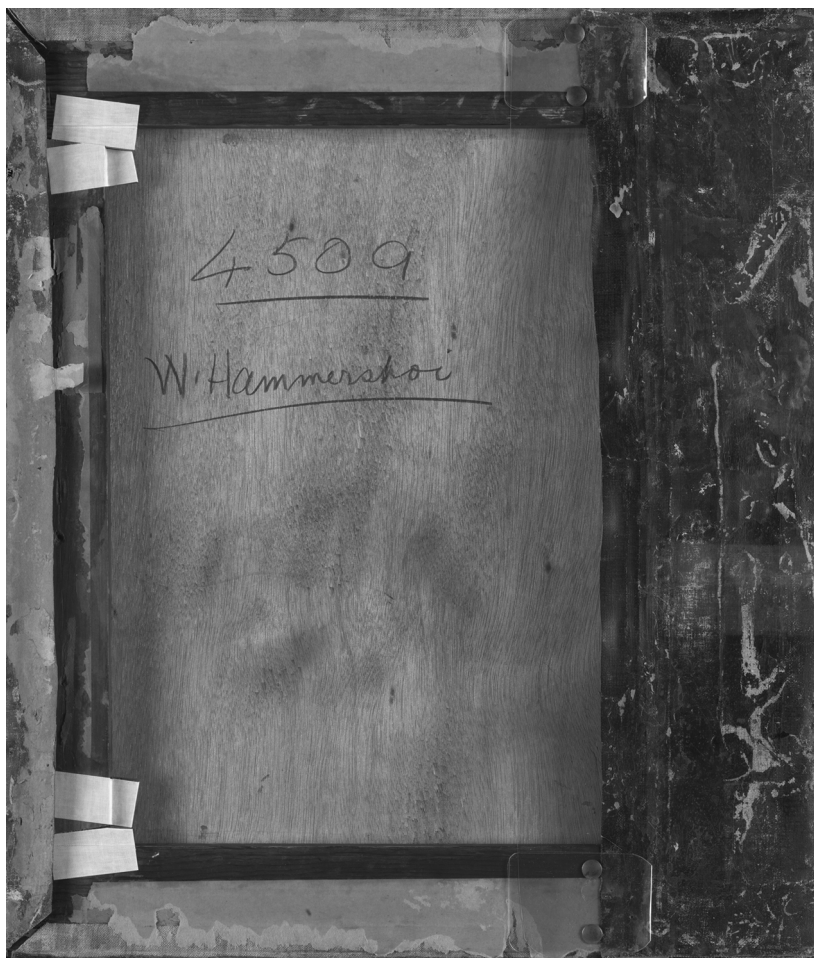


FIGURE 11. Verso of figure 10.

Ida's contemplative presence silently bridging the two. Just to her left, a thin pale-blue thread unwound from a spool tethers her to a table, but her body appears too still and slack to be sewing, her head too upright (fig. 14). The thread, more than an indication of actual domestic activity, reiterates the link between exterior and interior drawn by the long gray vertical. A tightly wound mass of colored fiber (its subtle hue and linearity make it a suggestive metaphor for Hammershøi's painting) unwinds toward the core of Ida's body, anchoring her to the domestic interior in all its material reality, while simultaneously signaling our inability to see *her* interior, or even the expressiveness of her hands and face, indeed to see any-



FIGURE 12. Detail of figure 11.



FIGURE 13. Hammershøi, *Interior, Strandgade 30*, 1909, oil on canvas, 55.5 x 60.5 cm, private collection.

thing beyond the nape of her neck and the back of her dress. Her mood is as opaque as the cream-colored paint marking the light on the floor.

By painting this composition repeatedly over the course of a decade both with and without a human figure, with the figure facing forward and (more often) away, Hammershøi tested painting's ability to capture inwardness *gradually* and *indirectly*, whether by showing a figure from behind or obscured by shadow, or merely showing the space she inhabits, as if she had recently departed and left an atmospheric trace of her thought in the room. In these interiors shadow operates as a metaphor for the elusive nature of melancholy. Hammershøi fills his rooms with ambiguous patches of darkness that vary between possible silhouettes cast by persons or things and ghost-like presences untraceable to any visible source. Shifting patterns of light and dark suggest the possibility of a flickering presence that has just evaporated in time—a suggestion that is especially tantalizing when viewing the Tate canvas knowing that Ida is there hidden behind the frame. This effect contributes to the persistent absorptive pull of Hammer-



FIGURE 14. Detail of figure 13.

shøi's interiors, whose sparsely appointed rooms and open doors beckon the viewer to pass through and replenish the presence that seems to have drained out of them like lost blood.³⁰

In introducing the "Shadowgraphs," A states, "We seek not the present but the past, not joy, for that is always present, but sorrow, because its nature is to pass by, and in the instant of the present one sees it only as one sees a person of whom one just catches sight the moment he turns the corner and disappears" (*EO*, p. 174). Hammershøi's shadow paintings evoke this atmospheric sense of just pastness, the intimation of a moment just missed, along with a presentness that invites the viewer's protracted experience of viewing as if wandering through the room. These layered

30. In "Shadowgraphs," A describes the inward movement of reflective sorrow as "like blood rushing from the outer surface, [offering] an intimation of it only because of the fleeting pallor" (*E*, 1:170). The tonal nature of the metaphor speaks to the cool, muted palette of Hammershøi's interiors and their absent or inaccessible figures.

temporalities, further exemplified by the work's rich, carefully mottled surface, contribute to the painting's contemplative mood and—along with its *Rückenfigur*, sparseness of detail, and total absence of narrative—encourage viewers to consider their projected path through it in existential terms, as a search for their own individual meaning.³¹ Put more strongly, the Kierkegaardian convergence of “the instant” and “consciousness of eternity” is the fundamental irony of Hammershøi's interiors, a pictorial expression of this central paradox of authentic existence developed in part 2 of *Either/Or* in the discussion of marriage (see *E*, 2:58–60, 26).

The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage

The model for the vast majority of Hammershøi's figure paintings was his wife, Ida, a fact frequently mentioned in the literature but never seriously considered as hermeneutically significant. The artist's sister, Anna, and his mother, Frederikke, appear in early works painted before his engagement in 1890, but after that point Ida became his constant collaborator, posing patiently day after day.³² Of course, this was largely due to Ida's easy availability in the space of their home, not to mention the artist's comfort with her, but these reasons do not lessen the significance of their relationship to the form and quality of his work.³³ Indeed, Ida's presence adds a vital layer to Hammershøi's life-long study of domestic life, one that is also key to the philosophical proposals of *Either/Or*—marriage.³⁴

Throughout the twenty-five years that Hammershøi painted his wife, from his first portrait of her in 1890 until his final painting in 1915, he portrayed her as a pensive and elusive presence, often appearing lost in her inner thoughts. In *Portrait of Ida Ilsted* (1890), painted from a photograph soon after the couple got engaged, Hammershøi substituted an unfocused, almost trance-like gaze for Ida's outward-directed look in the photograph,

31. For a sophisticated account of the temporal complexity of late nineteenth-century realism that explores the way certain painterly techniques and compositional devices merged effects of momentariness and duration, see Marnin Young, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism: Painting and the Politics of Time* (New Haven, Conn., 2015), esp. chap. 5 on James Ensor. On the *Rückenfigur*, a recurring motif in German Romantic painting, see Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (London, 1990).

32. Hammershøi's brother, Svend, appears a few times post-engagement, including in *The Coin Collector*, as do Frederikke and Anna, but the recurring female figure dressed in black is almost always Ida.

33. Susan Sidlauskas gives a richly nuanced analysis of another artist's portraits of his wife—dating to roughly the same period—as expressions of “the tension between the desire to engage and the fear of engagement” with another person (Susan Sidlauskas, *Cézanne's Other: The Portraits of Hortense* [Berkeley, 2009], p. 16).

34. Marriage and its daily vicissitudes are also central in Kierkegaard, *Gjentagelsen* [*Repetition*] (Copenhagen, 1843), published eight months after *Either/Or*.



FIGURE 15. Hammershøi, *Portrait of Ida Ilsted*, 1890, oil on canvas, 106.5 x 86 cm, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.

added shadows over her hands and around her seated form, and painted her eyes in two different colors: the right brown, the left blue (figs. 15–16).³⁵ The result is a highly enigmatic portrait of his betrothed that conveys the mystery surrounding both her physical person and her inner life. In the much

35. Krämer makes these observations in Krämer and Sato, “Catalogue Entries,” in *Hammershøi*, p. 144. The photograph Hammershøi worked from was taken soon after the couple’s engagement and perhaps for the sole purpose of the painting; see Vad, *Vilhelm Hammershøi and Danish Art at the Turn of the Century*, p. 52.



FIGURE 16. Photograph of Ida Ilsted, 1890, Hirschsprung Collection, Copenhagen.

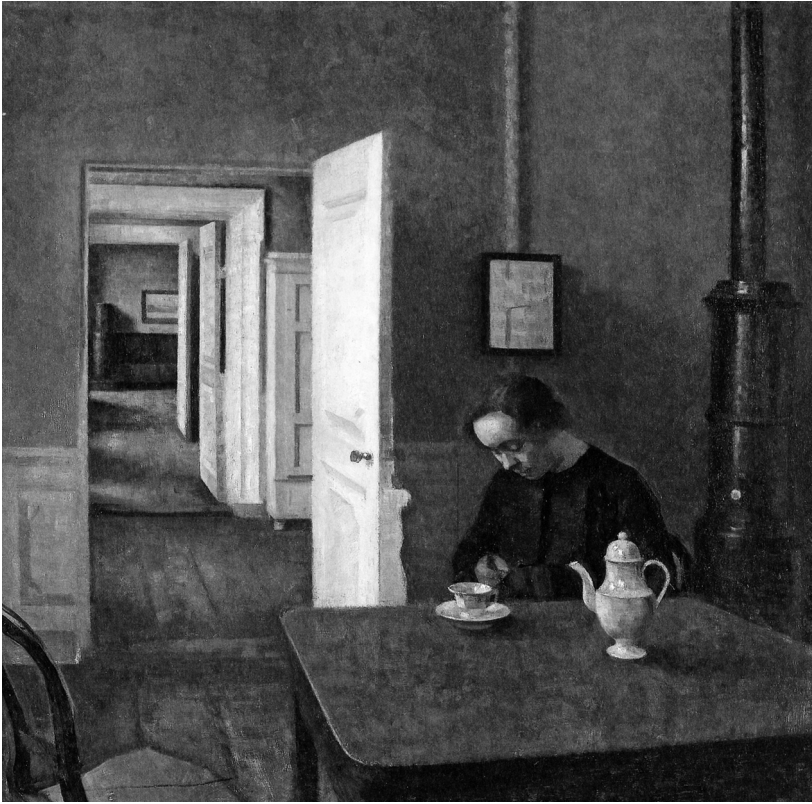


FIGURE 17. Hammershøi, *Interior, Strandgade 25*, 1915, oil on canvas, 72 x 65 cm, Marin Karmitz Collection.

later *Interior, Strandgade 25* (1915), the only painting the artist produced that year while severely ill, Ida is shown sewing at the table with a cup of coffee, while behind her an enfilade pulls the eye through deep space, with each room in the procession marked by a rhythm of streaming light and cast shadows (fig. 17). But our path through this passageway is blocked by an empty chair pulled away from the table. We are simultaneously invited to sit down with Ida, who looks demurely down toward her hands, and to walk past her toward the sofa visible through the doorway at the opposite end of the hall. The framed object hanging over her head and the cool, slate-gray shadow that surrounds it seem to stand for the inaccessibility of her thoughts. Although full of visible brushstrokes and tonal variation, this gray and white nonpicture bears no decipherable marks, no legible image or reflection.³⁶ Whether a mirror or a work of art,

36. This motif appears often in Hammershøi's work. See, for example, figure 2, discussed

its illegibility and lively surface force viewers back on themselves to consider the alternatives on offer for moving imaginatively through the picture.

The ironic modalities of deflection and obfuscation that Kierkegaard perfected—the indirect authorship, poetic use of metaphor, and dialectical rhetorical structure that define *Either/Or* and that are foundational for his oeuvre as a whole—were profound ways of challenging the modern reader to resolve his contradictory proposals for themselves.³⁷ Exemplary of these strategies is the long essay on “The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage” that opens part 2—the first section of *Either/Or* to be drafted—in which Kierkegaard examines the relationship between aesthetics and married love, mounting a spirited defense of marital commitment as the highest form of the aesthetic life.³⁸ This defense, voiced by the ethical Judge William, includes substantial sections in which Judge William ventriloquizes the alternative views of the aesthetic young man A, thereby building a double-sided picture of marital domesticity. Judge William must dismantle A’s arguments that marriage is an institution that spoils love with monotony, over-familiarity, and duty before advancing his own argument for marriage as the ultimate aesthetic experience. He recalls A’s view that a couple “ought to remain somewhat mysterious to each other, and insofar as one gradually discloses oneself, this must occur through the use of accidental events as much as possible, so that it becomes so relative that it can

earlier, and *Interior with Woman Sitting at a Table* (1910). The nonpicture motif in the latter painting is beautifully interrogated in Nicky Beer, “Still Life with Half-Turned Woman and Questions,” *The Diminishing House* (Pittsburgh, Pa., 2010), p. 21. The same motif—although typically more black than gray in tone—appears in many works by Henri Fantin-Latour, whose work Hammershøi saw at the French Exhibition in Copenhagen in 1888 and again at the Universal Exposition of 1889 in Paris. On the nonpicture motif in Fantin’s work, which also functions as a sign of interiority, see Bridget Alsdorf, *Fellow Men: Fantin-Latour and the Problem of the Group in Nineteenth-Century French Painting* (Princeton, N.J., 2013), pp. 132–41. On the possible influence of Fantin-Latour on Hammershøi see Monrad, “Intense Absence,” in *Hammershøi and Europe*, pp. 40, 54, 70–74.

37. On Kierkegaard’s indirect authorship and the high demands it places on his readers see M. G. Piety, “The Dangers of Indirection: Plato, Kierkegaard, and Leo Strauss,” in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard: Philosophical Engagements*, ed. Edward F. Mooney (Bloomington, Ind., 2008), pp. 163–74. Piety defends Kierkegaard against the harsh criticism he has received, especially from philosophers, for his allegedly “impenetrable” and overly “literary” rhetorical style, arguing that the demands this mode of writing places on readers are crucial to his philosophy of self-formation and individual choice (pp. 173, 163). See also Conant, “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense” and “Putting Two and Two Together.”

38. Kierkegaard wrote a draft of this essay before his departure for Berlin in October 1841, during the same tumultuous months leading up to his decision to break his engagement to Regine Olsen. The rest of part 2 and most of part 1 were written afterward in Berlin and Copenhagen; see Hong and Hong, “Historical Introduction,” in *E*, i:vii–viii.

be viewed again from many other sides” (*E*, 2:107).³⁹ The aesthete’s position speaks to a key aspect of Hammershøi’s interiors—the mystery they conjure from the most commonplace scenarios—especially the many interiors that picture Ida but render her psychologically inaccessible to the viewer, facing away or in lost profile and sometimes seen from across the room. She is certainly viewed “from many other sides” than the principal one—a direct view of her face. Hammershøi was interested in capturing her separateness and solitude through these indirect views, the way that any given glimpse of her—from the back, through a doorway, down the hall—can only ever impart the vaguest suggestion of her internal state, the way that our knowledge of another person, however intimate the relationship, is always contingent and oblique. Yet the repetition of rooms, angles, and motifs in these pictures, coupled with the artist’s steadfast chromatic restraint, suggests a rigor far removed from A’s sybaritic view, not to mention an aesthetic devotion to Ida as a multifaceted subject.

One of Judge William’s principle objections is to A’s view of love as conquest, one that A imagines as architectural: the division of a man and woman’s domestic lives into separate, clearly designated rooms that can sustain the erotic mystery of romantic love for as long as possible. In this view the compartmentalizing walls of domestic space present an enticing challenge to the conquering paramour: “Erotic love itself must have many boundaries, but every boundary must also be a voluptuous temptation to step over the boundary” (*E*, 2:107). A’s idea (in Judge William’s retelling) is to stave off marital boredom by sequestering oneself from one’s partner in a separate wing of the house, restricting contact to occasional romantic meetings interspersed with fleeting glimpses that happen merely by chance. “You would not trudge around arm in arm in a conjugal procession; . . . you would . . . sharpen your eyes in order to follow her, relapse into contemplation of her image when it disappeared from your sight” (*E*, 2:108). The basis of such a marriage, in A’s romantic conception, is “secretiveness”: “they must be such strangers to each other that the intimacy becomes interesting, [yet] so intimate that the strangeness becomes a stimulating resistance” (*E*, 2:106). Secrecy and surprise keep the relationship fresh, but these surprises are in fact carefully orchestrated by both parties: “Married life . . . must have the stamp of the accidental, and yet one must have a remote intimation of an artistry” (*E*, 2:106–107). Hammershøi’s many variations on the theme of Ida alone in a room are painted to look as if he has just happened upon her going about her daily life, avoiding as far as possible the theatricality of the pose, yet they all involved careful staging

39. This is Judge William ventriloquizing A.



FIGURE 18. Hammershøi, *Two Figures (The Artist and His Wife)*, 1898, oil on canvas, 72 x 86 cm, ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Århus.

including the rearranging of furniture and Ida modeling for long stretches of time. In comparison, a rare double portrait of the artist and Ida—*Two Figures (The Artist and His Wife)* (1898)—appears more self-consciously posed, but its composition, with Ida positioned frontally yet gazing down and away from her husband and the artist sitting across from her at a table and seen from behind, is a study of intimacy and estrangement in maximum tension (fig. 18). We are left to wonder whether his unseen eyes are directed at her and whether the lower half of her slightly outstretched arm extends toward him. The eclipse of these details suggests that the nature of their bond is impossible to represent, for others and perhaps for each other as well.⁴⁰

Judge William's response to A's poetic view of secrecy is intended to check the latter's romantic delusions: "Let us turn to the way things really

40. Hammershøi painted one other double portrait of himself and Ida during their trip to Paris in 1892 (David Collection, Copenhagen), which shows them side-by-side, bust-length and facing the viewer, but he described in a letter being "fed up" with the picture, whereas the later, much more unusual take on a marriage portrait left him "rather satisfied" (quoted in Vad, *Vilhelm Hammershøi and Danish Art at the Turn of the Century*, pp. 112, 176).

are in life.” Married love is love that survives time and adversity, he explains, and it can only survive such challenges through a deep “shared consciousness” based on openness and mutual understanding. Its temporality is gradual and eternal, not dependent on momentary thrills, and “its movements are not outward but inward,” leading to an altogether different form of secrecy that is strong and meaningful because it is shared (*E*, 2:109, 111). Here again Kierkegaard’s metaphors for marital harmony and discord are spatial and correspond to an idea of the domestic interior as a private retreat from social life: movements inward instead of outward, with a spouse’s kept secrets described as “[shadowgraphs] on the wall” (*E*, 2:117).⁴¹ Ideally, Judge William argues, marital love transcends this kind of secrecy as well as the boredom of routine. It is a unique instance of aesthetics reconciling itself with life, for “love itself is the esthetic,” and the only way for the aesthetic to be represented is “by living it” (*E*, 2:125, 137).

Hammershøi portrayed his wife simply living in a variety of ways: reading, playing the piano, stirring a cup of coffee, looking out the window, or merely being, staring into space and doing nothing at all. Restaging the most prosaic moments of her domestic life—repeatedly over the course of twenty-five years—he offers a series of glimpses into the everyday substance of their marriage, stilling these moments into meditative, elegantly constructed images of quiet thought. Sometimes Ida is engaged in tasks such as sewing or clearing dishes, but even in these pictures the mood is contemplative, not industrious. *Interior, Strandgade 30* (1899) shows Ida wearing an apron and appearing to clear the table, as if about to slip through an open door to her left (fig. 19). She holds an empty dish in her left hand, propped casually against her hip, and her right hand appears about to pick up a cup and saucer. Once we look closer and take into account the spatial compression of foreshortening, however, we realize that her right hand actually rests on the edge of the table, probably several inches away from the cup, and that her eyes, which at first glance we assume to be aimed downward toward the object of her task, are in fact fully closed. Ida appears absorbed in ruminations beyond the practicalities of everyday life, and the rumpled black tablecloth draped over the edge of the table in the foreground acts as a further sign of obscurity. The cloth, because of its artful crumpling and extension beyond the edges of the frame, recalls the artist’s presence behind the easel—both as the composer

41. Here Kierkegaard recalls the “Shadowgraphs” essay from part 1 but with a twist, giving the term a sinister inflection that registers Judge William’s disapproval of secretiveness.



FIGURE 19. Hammershøi, *Interior, Strandgade 30*, 1899, oil on canvas, 61 x 54.3 cm, Collection of Ambassador John L. Loeb, Jr., New York.

of this still life and as Ida's constant partner in daily meals—but the painting suggests that her inner thoughts are just as closed to him as they are to us, like the door behind the table sealing off the next room from our view. A companion picture painted the same year, *Interior* (1899), shows the same room with the same table, but Ida is turned around, showing her back to the viewer, with both her hands and her face completely invisible (fig. 20). In this painting the table is bare and both doors leading into the room are emphatically closed. The back of her neck gleams like a porcelain vase, its cool ivory glow juxtaposed with the shimmering highlight on the equally impenetrable stove. The nape of Ida's neck is Hammershøi's



FIGURE 20. Hammershøi, *Interior*, 1899, oil on canvas, 64.5 x 58.1 cm, Tate Gallery, London. Photograph © Tate, London, 2014.

favorite erotic allusion and a focal point of many of his paintings,⁴² perhaps because it signifies so well the convergence of intimacy and psychological inaccessibility that his interiors evoke as a key paradox of marriage.

Whether Hammershøi's artistic approach had anything to do with the state of his marriage we cannot know and is not a question I wish to pursue, but certainly his interiors exhibit a pervasive melancholy from which Ida's

42. To cite just a few examples among many, beyond those reproduced here, see *Interior* (1893) (Göteborgs Konstmuseum, Gothenburg); *Interior, Young Woman Seen from Behind* (1904) (Randers Kunstmuseum, Randers); and *Resting* (1905) (Musée d'Orsay, Paris).

recurring presence cannot be irrelevant. Melancholy and mystery have been central themes in the reception of these paintings since the early twentieth century. Hammershøi's contemporary, the Danish painter and art historian Karl Madsen, sensed behind his somber palette "an infinitely cautious person, a quiet, sad dreamer, the weirdest soul ever to grace Danish painting."⁴³ More recently, the American art historian Robert Rosenblum memorably described the artist's interiors as "melancholy domestic prisons" when promoting their exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 1998.⁴⁴ Yet despite the general consensus for the past century on the affective mood of Hammershøi's painting (a mood seen, in both the aforementioned examples, as a direct transfer from the artist's own temperament), very little has been written as to what the melancholy is about because Hammershøi sublimates this sense of reflective sorrow so fully into his paintings' forms, eliminating all narrative clues and, with rare exception, facial expressions. These paintings' melancholy is profoundly ambiguous, but it is precisely this ambiguity that resonates with Kierkegaard's presentation of marriage as either an artful game of secrecy, evasion, and erotic allusion (a game that skirts inwardness and therefore inevitably leads to melancholy) or a supreme aesthetic and spiritual achievement, an achievement that cultivates inwardness scrupulously, individually, and reciprocally, one that may not appear to others as joyful but whose depth of mutual feeling is nonetheless real.⁴⁵ This achievement, both pictorial and philosophical, was built on boundaries and limits—spatial and psychological enclosure, focused dedication, and a redemptive withdrawal from superficial social spheres—as well as on repetition, slow strengthening, and deepening meaning over time.⁴⁶ It is, therefore, a sober

43. Quoted in Patricia G. Berman, *In Another Light: Danish Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 2007), p. 233.

44. Quoted in "Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864–1916): Danish Painter of Solitude and Light," pastexhibitions.guggenheim.org/hammershot/index.html. Rosenblum describes the melancholy of the artist's work further in Robert Rosenblum, "Vilhelm Hammershøi, at Home and Abroad," in *Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864–1916): Danish Painter of Solitude and Light*, ed. Fonsmark et al. (New York, 1998), pp. 42–43. Rosenblum also gave a lecture introducing him to American audiences; see Rosenblum, "Vilhelm Hammershøi: A Melancholy Dane," lecture, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 30 June 1998. Patricia Berman's survey of nineteenth-century painting remarks that Hammershøi's works have been interpreted through the lens of melancholy, neurasthenia, and childlessness since Hammershøi's time; see Berman, *In Another Light*, p. 233.

45. "In marriage . . . the internal is primary, something that cannot be displayed or pointed to, but its expression is precisely love" (*E*, 2:152).

46. Stanley Cavell draws on and illuminates Kierkegaard's idea of the everyday redemption of marriage in his discussion of "remarriage comedies" in early Hollywood film; see Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), pp. 15, 240–41.

and profoundly *gradual* achievement, one that is extremely difficult to see because it is so rooted in the inwardness of both parties.

Building on “Shadowgraphs,” Kierkegaard’s essay on marriage develops his skeptical view of art’s capacity to represent inwardness in an extended discussion of the temporality of everyday life.⁴⁷ Married love, along with the peaceful domesticity it fosters, is for Kierkegaard a supreme instance of the reconciliation of aesthetic beauty with life because “its true ideality consists not in its being ideal at the moment but in its being continuous” (*E*, 2:135). And yet Judge William argues that this kind of ideality is impossible for visual art to represent. Erotic love, like any emotion geared toward “intensity in the moment,” lends itself to artistic representation, but married love is different (*E*, 2:135). It is only itself when its intimate observations and expressions are repeated consistently *every day*. Representing it “requires the protraction of time” (*E*, 2:136). Hammershøi’s interiors manage to convey this temporal dilation in the way they absorb the viewer in their deliberations, in the choice to follow one path through the picture versus another, to flit between light and shadow, to move from a window to the opacity of a picture to the back of a head or a closed door. These aesthetic deliberations have rich philosophical significance that the seeming thoughtfulness of Hammershøi’s figures, when they appear, underscore. Engaged in mundane, durational activities like playing the piano, reading, and sewing, they pull the viewer into their repetitive everyday experience while simultaneously emphasizing the solitude and impassable separateness of the individual mind. Furthermore, the paintings’ selective focus—with some areas precisely detailed and other areas abstracted or effaced—and their combination of bold geometric composition and delicate, varied facture create a push-and-pull between overall formal design and close observational detail that corresponds to the temporal dilation of their motifs.

One might say that Hammershøi’s interiors straddle both sides of the *Either/Or* divide: they capture both “the dreadful monotony, the everlasting *Einerlei* [sameness] in the alarming still life of marital domesticity” that

47. Fried has drawn on *Either/Or*, and on “The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage” in particular, to illuminate the singular achievement of the nineteenth-century German artist Adolph Menzel. Using Judge William’s argument about temporal extension as the essential aspect of married love’s eternal nature—an aspect Judge William deems unrepresentable by painting and sculpture in its limitation to “intensive” moments—Fried argues that Menzel’s works, and especially his drawings, manage to transcend this limitation and represent “the everyday” in the fullness of time. His reading is a brilliant challenge to Kierkegaard’s antagonism to visual art; see Fried, “Time and the Everyday; Menzel and Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*; with a Postscript on Fontane’s *Effi Briest*,” in *Menzel’s Realism*, pp. 141–65.

A fears and disdains (from this perspective, the solitary sensuousness of the butter in the 1901 *Interior* is the artist's most stunning ironic gesture), and Judge William's idea that monotony can be "precisely the expression of something beautiful," the idea that the everyday repetition of married life—its "continuous coming into existence"—is precisely what makes it "the summit of the esthetic" (*E*, 2:125, 127, 135, 137).⁴⁸ The artist was pleased when the French critic Théodore Duret called his work "very contemplative and personal."⁴⁹ His interiors are thoughtful, self-reflective paintings that strain beyond the plainness of their settings, insisting on the inseparability of aesthetics and private life.

It is this expansive view of the interior that Kierkegaard continually struggled to put into words, referring to the world and all of humankind as "this enormous household."⁵⁰ For him, the domestic interior was a multifaceted metaphor for inwardness and its many philosophical meanings, from anxiety and despair to aesthetic and spiritual fulfillment. Hammershøi's interiors are far less loquacious, and they do not span the extremes of Kierkegaard's positions; indeed, it is this very concentration of purpose, along with his persistent repetition of motifs, that gives his painting a kind of philosophical rigor. Ida's recurring presence in these interiors renders them much more than studies of space and design and even more than studies of interiority broadly conceived. Looking from a contemporary, less Kierkegaardian perspective, we might wish for shades of critique in Hammershøi's views of her marital role, and indeed, there is the suggestion of its tendency to confine, subdue, and further internalize the spirit. But the centrality of the solitary woman to his vision of domesticity is not critical in the feminist spirit of Henrik Ibsen's plays; rather, Ida's solitude and inaccessibility emerge as Hammershøi's key parameters for depicting the psychological sanctity of his domestic sphere, a sphere he represented again and again as a space of inviolate subjectivity and mysterious coexistence.⁵¹ There is no material

48. See figure 2.

49. "He [Duret] thought that my painting was very contemplative and personal and seemed extremely pleased with it." Unfortunately, we do not know the precise words Duret used in French, since Hammershøi relays the compliment in Danish: "Han syntes, at mit Maleri var meget aandsrigt og meget personligt og lod til at være meget glad over det" (Vilhelm Hammershøi, letter to Frederikke Hammershøi, Dec. 1891. Hammershøi Archive, Hirschprung Collection, Copenhagen).

50. "Deep within every human being there still lives the anxiety over the possibility of being alone in the world, forgotten by God, overlooked among the millions and millions in this enormous household" (Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, trans. and ed. Hong and Hong, 7 vols. [Bloomington, Ind., 1967–1968], 1:40).

51. Toril Moi has illuminated the feminist critique of traditional marriage and domestic life driving Ibsen's modernism, a critique that reveals the absolute values of idealist aesthetics to be

mark of deep mutual understanding between him and Ida in these works—that is simply beyond the power of painting to convey. Kierkegaard is right in that sense about the limits of art. But he is wrong that art cannot capture something of a person's inner life or the aesthetics of marriage. Hammershøi's paintings give us both, despite their insistence on the absolute privacy of the individual, with a visual poetics and persistent indirectness that Kierkegaard would have understood.

deeply unfair to women, radically limiting their freedom of choice; see Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 178–87, 295–319.