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Love and the Moment:
How to Keep Sex and Marriage from Being Romantic or Idolatrous

In his book *Sex and Love in the Home*, David Matzko McCarthy criticizes modern romantic love as a market-shaped desire to transcend the quotidian by bringing about a moment of infinite value, a moment that can in turn give significance to the humdrum duration of ordinary life. Seeking the infinite apart from the finite leads to self-defeating consequences, McCarthy argues, because the household becomes a threat to the romantic love that produced it.

McCarthy's critique of contemporary romantic love is trenchant and convincing. But his attempt to assimilate what he calls "personalist" theological reflections on marriage and sexuality to the romantic model fails to achieve the same degree of cogency. Paying particular attention to Vincent Genovesi's *In Pursuit of Love*, McCarthy accuses Genovesi's account and others like it (a category that includes most notably John Paul II's theology of the body) of seeking to transcend the finite through the achievement of an infinitely meaningful moment and, consequently, of distorting the significance of sexuality and of isolating the couple from broader social networks.

Though McCarthy does not mention Kierkegaard, his critique of romanticism and personalism parallels Judge William's critique of the aesthetic life in the second part of *Either/Or*, especially with respect to Judge William's insistence that it is the narrative that gives significance to the moment and not, as the aesthete would have it, the other way around.

Attending to the similarities between McCarthy's and William's arguments suggests a possible response to McCarthy's criticism of "personalism," drawing on the various senses in which Kierkegaard's pseudonyms employ the concept of "moment" throughout his work. In particular, the following progression is evident. In the first part of *Either/Or*, the aesthetic life is portrayed as the pursuit of ecstatic moments that can provide significance for the narratives and continuities of a life, providing a close parallel to McCarthy's description of contemporary romantic love. In the second part of that work, Judge William shows that the aesthetic project is self-defeating, and argues instead that the narratives and continuities of life give meaning to the moment, anticipating McCarthy's attempt to salvage sex and love by locating them in the continuities of the household. But in *Philosophical Fragments* and *The Concept of Anxiety* another kind of moment is in view. Though those works do not dispute the Judge's claim that the aesthetic moment must gain its significance from a narrative of responsible social commitment, they do suggest that another kind of moment, a decisive moment that is an atom of eternity rather than an atom of time, must itself give meaning to the narrative. Thus, the moment abstracted by the aesthete must be recontextualized in a narrative, which must, in turn, find its proper context in a moment that is an atom of eternity. Furthermore, without such a decisive moment, the hopeless Socratic project of producing meaning for oneself out of oneself is unavoidable; without it, in other words, the narrative that rescues love from romance becomes idolatrous.

This paper, then, will proceed as follows: After describing McCarthy's critique of romanticism and personalism, I will discuss the dialectic between narrative and the moment in some of Kierkegaard's works as a parallel to and extension of McCarthy's criticisms. Then I will argue that a personalist understanding of sexuality that roots it in covenantal or sacramental accounts of marriage, and so in a decisive moment, can affirm McCarthy's analysis of romanticism, deny his assimilation of personalism to romanticism, and reveal the pitfalls of his own merely narrative approach.