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TOPIC:

Kierkegaard's Humanistic and Literary Heritage

I

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**Kierkegaard's
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Guest Editor:

Flaviu-Victor Câmpean

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CONTENTS

Argument

Flaviu CÂMPEAN, *Emptiness and Uniqueness as Heritage*..... 7

*

George PATTISON, *Kierkegaard's Silences* 9

Steven SHAKESPEARE, *Returning to the Animal:*

The Christian Discourses and the Refusal of the Future..... 31

David R. LAW, *Learning to Face Death Earnestly: Kierkegaard's*

Critique of Inauthentic Conceptions of Death in "At a Graveside" 47

Leonardo F. LISI, *Art and the End of the World in Kierkegaard*..... 87

Noemina CÂMPEAN, *Long Life's Journey into Truth.*

Søren Kierkegaard, Eugene O'Neill and the Woman 115

Adrian ARSINEVICI, *Stairways to Heaven:*

Klimakos and Climacus..... 143

Daniel WATTS, *Between Action and Suffering:*

Kierkegaard on Ambiguous Guilt 165

Richard R. EVA, C. Stephen EVANS, <i>Revolutionary Neighbour-Love: Kierkegaard, Marx, and Social Reform</i>	193
--	-----

Book Review

Virgil CIOMOȘ, <i>Flaviu Câmpean, Identitatea melancolică la Søren Kierkegaard /</i> <i>The Melancholy Identity in Søren Kierkegaard</i>	213
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Argument:

Emptiness and Uniqueness as Heritage

The heritage of an author can never be reduced to the composite historical material that lags or develops after him, encompassing a discontinuous tradition or a function of discourse, as Foucault pointed out in his famous essay. I would rather say that the tradition or the function, be it ideologically or linguistically/ symbolically charged, always pertains to a new existence that leaves the author behind, ignoring the meaning and interpretation that any discourse entails. The very etymology of the Latin *heres* would sustain such an interpretation, which is not a new one but prior to any judicial or philosophical sense of individualism. Thus, the Proto-Indo-European root *ghe* originally meant to be left behind and abandoned, moreover, to be left *empty* – an emptiness which Foucault or Barthes (in *The Death of the Author*) correctly emphasized within the evolution of any discourse. Beyond the Foucauldian and Barthian hypotheses, the literary and humanistic perspectives that Kierkegaard, the ever modern and Christian *virtuoso* of deconstructivism before his time, can offer for us now, are relevant precisely by virtue of this abandon.

An apparently idealistic author, Kierkegaard seems to have become one of the canonical standpoints of the Modern philosophy of the subject while also revealing the already crumbling metaphysical remainders of the universal systems. But existence as perpetual transcendence, as a living interiority in and between the leaps, is not only a metaphysical end of inwardness following Hegel, as Jacob Taubes described it, putting it alongside Marx's "exterior" telos within the engrossing Hegelian eschatology. Due to the frankness of Kierkegaard's address to the unique individual (his original *den Enkelte*), existence is never a simply subjective melancholic ruin of universal consciousness/ awareness or a Platonic analogue of pure being. While Kierkegaard's stances with regards to his own melancholia are various and often contradictory, the religious identity,

particularly that of religiousness B, on the one hand, and the relational nature of selfhood on the other, surpass the “idle” philosophical eschatology of Christendom. Melancholy is otherwise a failed address to the selfhood’s identity as such, proving that selfhood should relate to the O/other in its own emptying out (that can be compared to a *kenosis*) in order to become a unique human identity. This is where I would situate the heritage between individuals and between human and God, that Kierkegaard’s oeuvre strives to approach, from the pseudonymous works to the Journal, the notes, and finally the theological discourses – all of them request this specific anti-melancholic receptivity. Moreover, I think that this emptiness is where the calling to assume a heritage can be grasped and that the writing as cure for melancholia is an abandon of the illusion of self-awareness in favour of uniqueness; hence the indirect communication and the request to take pseudonyms as full right authors. Kierkegaard clearly knew that his unique heritage would withstand the shock of fast change in civilization and that his “thick letters of friendship” (to paraphrase Sloterdijk’s essay on humanism, *Rules for the Human Zoo*) would address the unique individual and not the ideal author and thinker. It is up to our own uniqueness to still assume a humanistic and literary heritage whose stake is identity as such, to be contemporary with the letter of a poet of religiousness, but also to the wandering idea of the young Kierkegaard, who, contemplating the beaches at Gilleleje in 1835, had a revelation within a quasi-Pascalian train of thought: “I felt at one and the same time how great and how insignificant I am. Those two great forces, pride and humility, amicably confined. Fortunate the man for whom this is possible every moment of his life...”

I wish to express my thanks to the editing board of the IJHI, to the contributors and to all those who supported this two-volume special issue on Søren Kierkegaard.

Flaviu Câmpean

Kierkegaard's Silences

George PATTISON*
University of Glasgow

Abstract. The article sketches the ubiquity of the theme of silence in Kierkegaard's authorship, indicating its role in the aesthetic authorship and in Kierkegaard's *Zeitkritik*, before turning to religious silence. The main focus here is the discourse entitled 'Silence', which is one of the three so-called 'godly discourses' that constitute *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*. The article follows an exegetical path through the discourse, emphasizing the contrast between poetic silence and the silence one learns from nature as well as the problematic character of language in the divine-human relationship. It concludes with comments on the temporality of this relationship (with reference to Heidegger) and with an indication of the relevance of the associated discourse on 'The woman who was a Sinner'.

Keywords: silence, prayer, the poet, nature, language, God, time.

Introduction

This paper offers an interpretation of Kierkegaard's 1849 discourse on 'Silence', a work that, despite its brevity, effectively epitomizes so much of what is going on in his vast and rambling array of writings. At the same time, we shall see how these 'devotional' writings are also open to and even offer a certain response to central questions of existential anthropology that come to the fore in twentieth century phenomenology.¹

If there was ever anyone who deserved the epithet 'word-child' it was surely Søren Aabye Kierkegaard. With regard to writing, he has been described as 'graphomaniac', and he himself said to his nephew that 'as soon as I have pen in hand on a blank sheet of paper, I run the risk of writing on

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¹ Which is not to say that Kierkegaard himself was or should be read as a phenomenologist.

and on'², and with no editor or word-limit to cramp his style, his books could run on to near-impossible length. With regard to the spoken word, we have not only the testimony of contemporaries but his own much-cited note: 'I have just got back from a party of which I was the [life and] soul. Witticisms streamed from my mouth, everybody laughed and was amazed by me – but I left, and, yes, the dash ought to be as long as the radius of the earth's orbit--

-----and wanted to shoot myself' (SKS27, 235:1³) Kierkegaard, it seems, knew no middle ground between an endless outpouring of verbosity and a silence that, in this case, was the demonic silence of despair.

Yet although Kierkegaard knew extremes of speech and silence, where he is most interesting is in his manifold explorations and performances of both speech and silence and of the invisible threads connecting the one to the other, the silences of speech and the sounds of silence. Take irony. Irony is precisely a way of speaking that says nothing or else speaks in an essentially ambiguous way. The arch-aesthete Johannes the Seducer speaks and writes words of love effortlessly enough – but he either does not mean what he says or means it in a sense contrary to the surface meaning of his words. Recognizing this helps us to see the hidden connection between the 'musical' seducer (Don Giovanni), portrayed in the opening essay of *Either/Or*, who overwhelms his victims like a force of nature, without the help of words, and 'The Seducer' of 'The Seducer's Diary' whose technique centres on verbal ingenuity. Yet, this Seducer too, *and in a crucial sense*, operates *outside* of language. In terms of the Heideggerian definition of *logos*, his speech is not truth-disclosing but truth-concealing. It is speech that does not speak – 'and men speak only to conceal the mind'.⁴

² J. Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard. A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 457.

³ References to Kierkegaard's works are to the new edition of *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, available on-line. Translations from the discourses on the lily and the bird are from my own translation in *Kierkegaard's Spiritual Writings* (New York: Harper, 2010).

⁴ From Edward Young, quoted several times by Kierkegaard.

In 'Shadowgraphs', another essay from *Either/Or* 1, Kierkegaard sets out the metaphysical assumptions undergirding the aesthetic view of life:

And is it not ingenious and meaningful that our little room is strewn with grass, as is customary when there is a funeral. Doesn't nature itself give us its consent, if we pay attention to the wild storm raging around us, or heed the wind's mighty howl? Indeed, let us keep quiet for a moment and listen to the music of the storm, its impudent course, its bold summons, and to the defiant bellow of the sea, the wood's anxious sighs, the trees' despairing crashing, and the grass's cowardly whisper? People rightly say that the divine voice is not in the rushing wind but in the gentle breeze – but our ears are not formed to catch gentle breezes; instead they are [formed] to drink up elemental noise. And why should [the storm] not break forth more powerfully still and make an end of life and of the world and of this short speech, which has at least the advantage over all the rest that it soon comes to an end.' (SKS2, 166).

This philosophy postulates the origin of the world in a blind and purposeless vortex, a restatement of ancient atomism in post-Romantic mood in which all there really is beyond the tapestry of human speech is 'elemental noise'. The world is essentially 'silent' in the specific sense that no matter how much ever gets said none of it means anything at all – sound and fury signifying silence. This lack of fundamental meaning is most immediately and evidently present in the ineluctable death to which all life, inclusive of all human life, irreversibly tends.

The Kierkegaardian aesthetes are undoubtedly capable of exerting a certain seductive fascination. But he also shows that what they supposed to be a kind of elitist exceptionalism is actually typical of modern petit bourgeois life. In the 1846 analysis of 'The Present Age', Kierkegaard characterizes this age in terms of its all-encompassing 'chatter', a non-stop stream of spoken and printed words dragging discourse towards ever greater formlessness, superficiality, and the levelling out of all substantial differences and distinctions.

And just as the public is a pure abstraction so too will human speech finally become [an abstraction]. There will no longer be anyone who talks but an objective reflection will gradually produce an atmospheric something, an abstract noise that will make all human speech superfluous, just as machines make workers superfluous. In Germany they even have handbooks for lovers, so it will end with a loving couple sitting and speaking anonymously with one another. Everywhere there are handbooks, and education will soon consist entirely in becoming adept at a larger or smaller summation of the views presented in such handbooks... (SKS8, 98-9).

The chatterers themselves ‘dread the moment of silence that will reveal the emptiness’ (SKS8, 93), and, like the aesthetes, would doubtless prove resistant to Heidegger’s counsel that our only recourse is to attend to a ‘call of conscience’ that calls us back to the wisdom of mortality and which, as he puts it, is a ‘silent call’ that says nothing and that, as I read *Being and Time*, ultimately bespeaks the silence of the grave. Overcoming our individual anxiety and breaking free from our cultural denial of death, we must simply see ourselves as we are: mortals. But is that Kierkegaard’s counsel too?

The review of *Two Ages* points to but does not develop a religious response to the crisis of the age. This response is set out in Kierkegaard’s manifold religious discourses, in which we encounter a kind of silence that is (I suggest) essentially different from the silence of both aesthetes and chatterers. This is no longer a silence reflecting the sheer noise produced by the cosmic vortex, but a silence amenable to and actively opening towards the possibility of genuine speech. Ultimately, Kierkegaard sees such a possibility as grounded in the individual’s God-relationship, where it finds its supreme exemplification in the moment of divine human exchange that we call ‘forgiveness’. However, his approach to this decisive moment takes us on a detour via the countryside of northern Sjaelland (‘out there’, as he puts it), and the lilies and the birds of the Sermon on the Mount. These are the subject of, altogether, thirteen of Kierkegaard’s upbuilding discourses, of which it is the three discourses ‘Silence’, ‘Obedience’, and ‘Joy’, published

in book-form in 1849 under the title *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air* and with the sub-title ‘Godly Discourses’, that are the focus of this paper. Here, silence is no longer the infinite silence of a purposeless cosmos but a silence rooted and grounded in a God-relationship that finds its eminent instantiation in the mutual calling of God and creature. Here, speech and silence find their point of entire interpenetration, which, as we shall then see in conclusion, provides a context for understanding the Christian gospel of forgiveness. In these terms, the theme of silence allows us also to track the entwining of a certain theology of creation and a certain theology of redemption in Kierkegaard’s work, a point I take to be crucial in understanding just what kind of ‘theology’ he has to offer.

The Preface, the Prayer, and the Text

As is generally the case with a book by Kierkegaard, we do well not to skip the preface and in this case we learn three important things from it. Firstly, we learn that what follows is a text that ‘recalls the beginnings’ of his authorship, especially *Either/Or* and the *Two Upbuilding Discourses*, both from 1843. Not only was it published on the same day as the second edition of *Either/Or*, but it also referred explicitly to this earlier work in the second discourse, ‘Obedience’. This opens by telling the reader that ‘You know how there is often talk in the world about an “either-or” and how this either-or arouses considerable attention, dealing in the most diverse ways with diverse issues, hoping, fearing, busily active, tense but inactive, and so on’ (SKS11, 26). The first discourse too makes this connection by the way in which it contrasts the different understandings of silence on the part of the poet and the gospel. As in *Either/Or*, the position of the poet is shown to be the unconscious expression of a deep suffering that the poet (i.e., aesthete) is unable to comprehend or to master. His songs are equivalent to the screams of those being roasted alive in the bronze ox of Phalaris, a device that transformed the tyrant’s victims’ cries into a semblance of sweet music.⁵

⁵ As described in the aphorism with which *Either/Or* begins.

Secondly, the preface recalls the special relationship between author and ‘his’ reader that is advertised in the preface to the *Two Upbuilding Discourses* of 1843. There, Kierkegaard had insisted that this relationship remains ‘secret’ like ‘a modest flower in the shade of the great forest’, an analogy that now finds a more direct application in discourses that focus especially on the image of the flower. It is ‘secret’ because even though all its words are manifestly in the public domain its meaning is revealed solely to those who read it with the intention of being edified or built up by it. Thirdly, the preface reminds us that, like the earlier discourses, these are the works of Kierkegaard’s ‘right hand’. The insistence on secrecy is not a result of the author’s ironic relation to his words since we can be assured that they are being offered in good faith and represent a good will on the part of the author.

Similarly, it is important not to skip the prayers that introduce several of the religious writings. These offer a kind of ‘attunement’, a function that reflects the Romantic background to much of Kierkegaard’s literary theory and practice. This particular prayer asks God that we might be helped by the lily and the bird to remember what we might have forgotten about ‘what it is to be human’ and thus helps put us in a frame of mind that is both attentive and receptive. But if the prayer has a primary function of inducing a right state of mind on the part of the reader, its role is not just a matter of creating a certain ‘mood’. What is being prayed for is not something indistinct or indeterminate, but something quite specific. As the prayer itself says, there is something for us to learn and this something is no less than ‘what it is to be human and... what godliness demands of human beings’ (SKS11, 10). This is said to be both difficult to learn and easy to forget and it is likely that we are so far from being in a position to learn it ‘once and for all’ that we will only be able to proceed ‘little by little’. And, with a glance back to the critique of the present age, the prayer pointedly laments that this is in part due to the pressure of society, ‘the crowd’, in which it is so easy to forget what really matters and so hard to find the silence that might inaugurate a speech deeper than social chatter. It is precisely for this reason that we must

leave the city, the 'human swarm', and go out to the fields where we can be alone with the lily and the bird and learn the lesson that they are uniquely suited to teach about what it is to be human and what godliness demands.

The conclusion of the prayer spells out what, more exactly, this demand consists in, namely, silence, obedience, and joy. But these should not be thought of as three separate things, perhaps reprising the Kierkegaardian stages of the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. In this case, it would only really be 'joy' that corresponded to the religious aim of the discourses, with silence and obedience being reduced to the level of stages on the way. That this is not the case seems to be suggested by Kierkegaard's own subsequent comments about the role of silence as the point of departure for the three discourses:

The beginning is not what one begins with but what one arrives at and one reaches it by going backwards. The beginning is this art of becoming silent, for there is no art in being silent in the way that nature is silent. And to be thus, in the deepest sense, silent, silent before God, is how one begins to learn the fear of God. For just as the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, silence is the beginning of the fear of God; and just as the fear of God is more than the beginning of wisdom since it is 'wisdom' itself, so too is silence more than the beginning of the fear of God – it is 'the fear of God'. (SKS11, 17)

Learn silence, and you will have learned the lesson of the whole course of teaching. In confirmation of this, the closing words of this first discourse take up the words of the Sermon on the Mount itself: 'Seek first the Kingdom of God, become like the lily and the bird, that is, become utterly silent before God, and then the rest shall be added unto you' (SKS11, 24f.). Truly to have learned silence would also be to have learned obedience and its attendant joy. Silence is not an attribute or a state but a certain 'how' of existence, a way of being 'one's self' that has its source in an exigent demand being made upon us. This does not mean becoming something different from what we already are, since only the person who is already silent can become silent and therefore already 'is' what s/he is called upon to become. This is

said not so as to indulge in paradoxes or word-games but rather so as to emphasize the primacy of Kierkegaard's central motif of movement or becoming. The goal is not 'the end' but is, simply, to get moving, to let oneself be moved by God and moved towards God, to become the existent being that is in movement towards God. To have made a beginning is therefore already to be in motion and therefore already, in a sense, to have achieved the end. And, by the same token, we cannot be obedient or joyful except under condition that we are engaged in the initial movement of becoming silent. These are not 'outcomes' of silence, but how silence shows its own truth.

We are still within the orbit of the opening prayer – and there is more. For the prayer not only orientates us towards the aim of the discourse, it also informs us as to why we need to be instructed in silence, obedience, and joy. If we ought to be or to be becoming silent, obedient, and joyful, we are not yet what we ought to be or what we shall be, which is to say that we are not what we are.

We have already noted a principal reason why this is the case. Especially in the years after he had been viciously lampooned in the satirical journal *The Corsair*, Kierkegaard sees 'the crowd' or 'the human swarm' as the primary obstacle to knowing the truth about who we are and being who we are. Under the spell of collective mimeticism we neglect the interiority that is essential for the nurturing of the God-relationship in favour of socially defined and socially derived roles and identities. 'In the company of others and especially in a crowd it is so hard to discover what it is to be human and, if one has elsewhere learned something about the matter, so easy to forget it and to forget what godliness demands of human beings,' writes Kierkegaard in the opening lines of the prayer (SKS11, 10). The crowd may not be the ultimate *cause* of our fall away from being true to ourselves, but it suggests that if we have once lost our ontological assurance, the life of the modern crowd will make it exceptionally difficult for us to retrieve what we have lost and find our way back to the beginning that is also the end, namely, becoming a self in motion towards God.

The prayer has been finished, but before the discourse proper begins we encounter a further preliminary paratextual element, namely, what the rubric calls ‘The Gospel for the Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity’, i.e., the full text of Matthew 6.24-34, printed, on Kierkegaard’s instructions, with a typeface echoing that of the official book of common prayer. In this way, Kierkegaard clearly suggests that what we are being summoned to is not simply an act of private devotional reading, but rather that we are entering into a quasi-liturgical dynamic of instruction and edification. Ecclesiastically-minded readers should, however, exercise caution. Kierkegaard by no means breaks with his long-standing conviction that we cannot be built up except as ‘individuals’ and that the reader of his discourses is always addressed in the singular, as a ‘Thou’. Nevertheless, it is striking that in these as in other discourses the ‘reader’ is also addressed as a ‘listener’, extending the imaginative conceit that we are participating in something common, in a public, liturgical action. And that this action begins with the reading of scripture is already to begin with the beginning, namely silence.

Kierkegaard’s strategy here, I suggest, can be illuminated by Franz Rosenzweig’s comments on ‘The Sociology of the Multitude: Listening’ in *The Star of Redemption*. According to Rosenzweig, the purpose of Jewish liturgy is to prepare humanity for the silence of eternity. Liturgy reflects the rays of the eternal star in the annual cycle and the purpose of the reading of scripture in the context of the community’s liturgical life is precisely to give instruction in the art of being silent and of participating in the divine silence. In a normal dialogue, the listener will later become the speaker and the speaker become the listener. But in the dialogue with God, the roles are non-exchangeable. ‘What one is to learn here,’ Rosenzweig writes, ‘is not that kind of listening that is a stimulus to speaking but that which has no connection whatsoever with any kind of response. Many have to listen.’⁶ Such shared listening is basic to the possibility of there being a *holy* people at all, since only being silent together before God guarantees the exclusion

⁶ F. Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), p. 343.

of human hierarchy or mimeticism. By prefacing the discourse with prayer and with a liturgically framed scripture lection Kierkegaard is thus setting in motion what Rosenzweig calls a certain ‘sociology of the multitude’, a multitude that is no longer a crowd but a community founded in and by silence before the Word of God.

We might think that having become silent before the reading of scripture we have already done the one thing needful. But we should also remind ourselves of the warning in the prayer that we are likely only to learn a ‘godly’ silence ‘little by little’ and the idea that we might have done the whole thing in an instant might therefore be a further piece of self-deception. Entangled in the abstract emptiness of the crowd as we are, it will take time to be weaned from our habitual self-forgetfulness and, as we grow in silence, obedience, and joy, to recognize and to strip away the habits of collective mimeticism that we have allowed to become so deeply engrained in our whole way of being. The pedagogy of the discourses is, in this regard, twofold: negatively, we are being liberated from the old, whilst positively we are being led towards the new.

The Preamble

It is the negative aspect that comes to the fore in the preamble to the discourse, which takes up the question of the poet (/aesthete). As is typical of Kierkegaard’s discourses, ‘Silence’ opens with a prelude-like introduction that gradually leads the reader towards the text or theme that is the main subject of meditation. We are to learn silence, but we begin in this prelude with the virtuoso of language – the poet! Kierkegaard, to use the Danish expression, ‘gives the word’ to the poet himself, voicing his wish to be like the flower or like the bird – echoing, indeed, a certain kind of rapture known also from English Romantic poetry. ‘Oh, that I were a bird or like a bird, like the bird so free, flying far, far away over land and sea for the joy of journeying, so close to heaven and coming to, Oh, so distant lands... Oh, that I had the lightness of the bird that, when it needs a foothold can even build

its nest upon the sea!... Oh, that I were a flower, or like that flower in the meadow, blissfully in love with myself and nothing more...' (SKS11, 13) But we also learn from the outset that this is the expression of an unhappy consciousness, since, as the poet also says: 'Alas, but I feel only the bonds that tie me again and again and even nail me to the spot where daily sorrows, sufferings and tribulations confront me: this is where I am compelled to live, my whole life long!... [A]las, my heart is split as human hearts are, and I am unable either to please myself by breaking with everything or to sacrifice everything in love!' (SKS11, 13)

The poet assures us that he truly wants to be like the lily or like the bird, but simultaneously acknowledges his inability to be so, implying that this is no arbitrary incapacity but is rooted in a malaise of the human heart, 'split as human hearts are'. But is the poet's inability to become like the lily and the bird really indicative of a deep fissure in human being itself, or is it a contingent failing that can be surmounted and made good?

We have heard the poet's own view. He would like to be like the lily and the bird, but he cannot be. Yet, Kierkegaard points out, the fact that the gospel instructs us – commands us – to become like them surely implies that we can do this. As he puts it in *The Sickness unto Death* (another work being written in the same period): 'God is: that all things are possible'.

In his earlier critique of the aesthetic, Kierkegaard had maintained that poetry and the poet belong in the realm of possibility: imagination leads us beyond the world of what is to a world of what may be. But now we are being presented with the paradox that it is precisely the poet, living in an atmosphere of possibilities, desires, and promises who cannot believe in the decisive possibility that he might become what he truly wants to be. Although he can believe all manner of fantastic self-projections, he cannot believe in himself – which is why Kierkegaard now reproaches him for lacking a 'sense of seriousness'.

Illustrating his point, Kierkegaard reminds us that a child – at least an early nineteenth century child – will never ask for reasons or explanations when told by its parent that it ought to do something. Because it has been

told, it believes not only that it must but also that it can do what is asked. In this regard, then, the poet is like a malingering child. From the point of view of early twenty-first century pedagogy, this, of course, is troubling. We try to avoid burdening our children with ‘oughts’ but rather to look to identifying and nurturing their own freely-discovered potential. Kierkegaard’s assumptions seem, to us, to be a charter for abuse. But let us not get distracted by an illustration that is clearly assumed to be non-controversial. For what is at issue is not, in the first instance, relationships between human beings, but between human beings and God, that is to say, the human and creaturely relation to the God who is by definition the absolute initiator of all that is and who foresees every action and reaction of which the creature is capable. And if we also recall that, for Christian faith, everything this God has made is good, this will also apply to human beings’ existential possibilities. That I am able to do what I ought to do means simply that I am capable of existing as the human being I am created to be, i.e., that I am capable of being myself. Being human is simply having the possibility of succeeding in being human – and at the simplest, most everyday level. As Kierkegaard will say in the third discourse, ‘Joy’: ‘So, the fact that you came into the world, that you exist, that “today” you have got what you need in order to exist, that you came into the world, that you became a human being, that you can see – just reflect on the fact that you can see – that you can hear, that you can smell, that you can taste, that you can feel... is this nothing to be joyful about?’ (SKS11, 43-4). In short, we have all the possibilities we need to be the creatures that we are.

The analysis of the poet’s despair over his incapacity to be like the lily and the bird is not only with regard to the relationship between duty and possibility. It also relates to the temporality of the poetic wish. His absorption in a cloud of unreal possibilities indicates a flawed relation to the time of his own life. The child doesn’t need time to reflect on what he ought to do: he does it. The poet, however, suspended between possibility and action, is unable to find the decisive moment in which to act. It is never the right time. Thus, his inability to become silent indicates his being out of step with time.

Being preoccupied with what he wants to do but cannot deprives him of the time in which to enjoy what is even now being offered to him. This, then, is a case of what Michael Theunissen has called the tyranny exerted over human life by time— and in this regard, we might anticipate that the discourse’s instruction in how to become silent will not only teach us to become silent but also help us to become free from this tyranny and perhaps direct us to another way of being in time, a way on which, like the child, we will also have time ‘for games, for joy, and for suchlike things’(SKS11, 16).

But if, as Kierkegaard supposes, we have the capacity to become silent, why should we need to be instructed in it? Perhaps – and this repeats a thought with which we are becoming familiar – it is not a *simple* case of either/or. We already have all that we need to be who we are – and yet we are not entirely who we are. If we were, we would not be so susceptible to the seductive words of the poet, this unhappy victim of Phalaris seeking companions in misery. There is something missing and, for Kierkegaard as for Augustine, the task is to seek what we already have but also seem to have lost. And it is precisely this term ‘seek’ that gives him the key to the further development of the discourse, as found in the text of the gospel itself: ‘Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness’.

The Discourse

Kierkegaard has now arrived at his main theme. There are words to be avoided and words to which we should attend, and if we are to learn to resist the words of the poet we should all the more be attending to the words of the gospel, specifically to the evangelical saying that, as he says, ‘trains a person up by, as it were, muzzling them, and to every single question about what they ought to do answers, “No, seek *first* the Kingdom of God”’ (SKS11, 18).

But if we are temporally distracted like the poet or man of the crowd, how are we ever going to find the time, that right time, in which our many possibilities become focused in the possibility of freely acting *now*. The

question of finding time is also a question of how to begin, since there is no time without a beginning of time. And this search for a beginning takes us back, once more, to the beginning of the discourse, and to the prayer with which the discourse began or, more exactly, the prayer that preceded the beginning. ‘Seek first the Kingdom of God – that means: pray!’ And this again means that if we were really able to pray that initial prayer as it should be prayed, we would already have known a foretaste of the joy with which the cycle of discourses ends.

But praying is more than (vainly) repeating words written by someone else. When prayer is truly prayer, it is prayer from the heart, the expression of what each of us, individually, really wants. But if, as the discourse finds us at the beginning, we are more or less caught up in the life of the crowd and more or less under the spell of the poet, not really knowing our own hearts (and perhaps, like the poet, afflicted by a ‘split heart’), how can we know what we want or are capable of? In order to pray, it seems that we must learn what it is we are to pray for, i.e. what we might be capable of if our prayer were to be answered. But it is this logic that, according to Kierkegaard, makes prayer an eminent mode of becoming silent ‘before God’:

God is in heaven and we are on earth and therefore we cannot easily talk together. God is love and human beings – as one says to a child and maybe even for its benefit – are little rascals, therefore they cannot easily talk together. [...] The person who knows how to pray knows this and those who don’t know how to pray might perhaps learn this by praying. Perhaps there was something that was very much on your mind, something that was so important to you, something that made it so pressing for you to explain yourself to God that it made you afraid of forgetting some detail and then, if you had forgotten anything, you were afraid that God would not Himself be able to remember it – and so you focused your mind on praying with real inwardness. And what happened then, if you did indeed pray with real inwardness? Something wonderful. For as you prayed more and more inwardly, you had less and less to say, and finally you became entirely silent. You became silent and, if it is possible that there is something even more opposed to speaking than silence, you became a listener. You had thought that praying

was about speaking: you learned that praying is not merely keeping silent but is listening. That is how it is. Praying is not listening to oneself speak, but is about becoming silent and, in becoming silent, waiting, until the one who prays hears God. (SKS11, 17)

That language is now portrayed as an obstacle in the way of the God-relationship throws significant retrospective light on the choice of the poet, the virtuoso of language, as representing the alienated condition of the human heart. Yet Kierkegaard also says in the discourse that language is the ‘advantage’ that human beings have over other creatures, so how, then, can it thus become an obstacle in the most decisive relationship of human life? We might think of Hölderlin’s saying that language is ‘the most dangerous of gifts’, but also of *The Concept of Anxiety*, in which Kierkegaard had himself dispensed not only with the voice of prohibition but also with the serpent, arguing that all that was necessary was that Adam should be able to speak with himself. Why? Because speech inaugurates a division within the world. Once named, the tree is no longer simply the tree that it is and nothing more, since it becomes an individual of a species, or ‘my’ tree as opposed to ‘yours’, or a hawthorn rather than a pine, or even a sublime revelation of a ‘Thou’. And I, when I have once named myself, am no longer simply the I that I am, but I am I and not-you, male and not female, human and neither beast nor God. For Hegel this indicates the presence of the universal in even the most elementary ostensive definition, but Kierkegaard sees it as the start of a process of infinite reflection that, in worldly time, can never complete the circle of its own becoming and that launches us into a world of comparison, heightening our vulnerability to the mimetic attractions of the crowd since I now experience my ‘I’ as meaningful only in the mirror of a language that is from the outset ‘not my own’. Language does not make the Fall necessary. But language exponentially increases our freedom to fall away from thinking of ourselves as ourselves.

This also implies that language is a dubious means of freeing ourselves from the consequences of the Fall. Just as language doesn’t make the Fall necessary, stopping talking won’t of itself save us. But if we could be silent, perhaps our sufferings might at least find some assuagement.

Kierkegaard does not regard nature as idyllic. There is suffering everywhere. The lily suffers, the bird suffers. But neither the lily nor the bird multiplies their sufferings by talking about them or by comparing their suffering with that of others. ‘The bird is not absolved from suffering, but the silent bird absolves itself from what makes suffering heavier (the uncomprehending sympathy of others) and from what makes suffering last all the longer (talking a lot about suffering) and from what makes suffering worse than suffering (the sin of impatience and dejection)’ (SKS11, 20). Likewise in the case of the lily:

It cannot dissimulate, for as it changes color it betrays the fact that it is rotting and one can see from the pallor that comes over it that it is suffering – but it keeps silent... For the lily, suffering is suffering, neither more nor less. But precisely when suffering is neither more nor less than suffering, suffering is then made as simple and straightforward as possible and thereby also as little as possible. (SKS11, 21)

Language is the advantage that humans have over other creatures – but only if we also know how to keep silent. In human life, however, suffering typically calls forth our extreme loquacity.

It is a mistake when people grow impatient or, worse, desperate, and think they know what they are saying when – although this is really an abuse of speech and of having a voice – they say or cry, “If only I had a voice like that of the storm and could express all my suffering as I feel it!” Ah, but this would be a foolish move, since the feeling of their suffering would increase in exact proportion to their power to speak of it. No – but if you could keep silent, if you had the silence of the bird, then your suffering would indeed become less’ (SKS11, 21).

To speak about our sufferings is always implicitly to compare them with the sufferings (or perhaps with the joys) of others. This is how, in the second discourse, Kierkegaard further evokes the sufferings of a lily that has grown in a place ‘as inauspicious as possible’. If it was a human being it would doubtless complain and claim a better place, but Kierkegaard imagines

the lily speaking quite otherwise: “I myself have not been able to decide my place or my circumstances, so this means that it is not in the least my concern. That I stand where I stand is God’s will”. That is how the lily thinks, and that things really are as the lily thinks, that it is God’s will, can be seen in the fact of its loveliness – for not even Solomon in all his glory was thus attired’ (SKS11, 32). And, returning to the discourse on ‘Silence’: ‘if just two of us talk together – and all the more if we are ten or more – it is so easily forgotten that you and I, we two, are before God. But the lily, our teacher, is deep. It doesn’t let itself get involved with you, it keeps silent and by keeping silent it indicates to you that you are before God and are to remember that you are before God, so that you too in all seriousness and in truth might become silent before God’ (SKS11, 22).

The expression ‘before God’ will find manifold applications in Kierkegaard’s later writings, but we should note that this seemingly spatial metaphor has also a significant temporal dimension. We are not just ‘before’ God but also ‘towards’ God.

The danger of language, as we have heard, is connected with the danger of comparison that, in its social aspect, culminates in a culture of unrestrained mimeticism. But comparison is also always temporal, since it is always also comparing what we have or are with what we have had or been or with what we might acquire or become. It is this temporal aspect of comparison that Kierkegaard alludes to when he speaks of the bird not being guilty of the sin of ‘impatience and dejection’. The bird, he says, ‘keeps silent and waits’ (SKS11, 19). It can do this because it ‘knows, or, more precisely, it fully and firmly believes, that everything happens at its proper time and therefore it waits: it knows that it is not its business to know the day or the hour, and therefore it is silent. It will surely happen at an opportune time, the bird says – only it doesn’t say it... it keeps silent and waits’ (SKS11, 19).

Self-acceptance is always also acceptance of time as the ineluctable condition of bodied human existence. Time – and change and death – belong to the same basic level of created life as hearing, smell, taste, feeling, and sight. And so, once more, we are led back to the question of beginnings. In

seeking a beginning, we do so as beings that are always already ‘in’ time and therefore as beings that have, in a sense, always already begun to be who and as we are. To seek a beginning is therefore to seek a new beginning, the possibility of beginning again. But to do so as creatures in time means to seek a beginning that is still to come. Prayer is not simply humbling ourselves under the will of God in the present (as the lily does). It is also seeking the Kingdom that is to come: ‘Thy Kingdom come!’, a prayer that Kierkegaard says is the most direct expression of knowing ourselves as existing ‘before God’. Human existence is premised on the temporality of realizable eschatology, which, as such, is also and at the same time, the revelation of who we *are* and *have been* created to be.

Kierkegaard has led us away from the crowd to where we can be silently alone before God with the lily and the bird. Is, this, then a Christian reworking of a Romantic nature philosophy: is it to nature and to its ‘thousand voices’ that we are to attend as and when we have grown silent? Is it nature’s own silence that we are here engaged in interiorizing? But if this is so, what then is the difference between this ‘godly’ approach to nature’s silence and that of the poet? The difference is that it is neither to the voice of nature nor to the silence of nature that we are to listen when we have once arrived’ out there’. Silence is indeed everywhere in nature. As Kierkegaard writes:

Out there it is silent, and not only when everything falls silent in the silence of night but also when the day is stirring as through a thousand chords and everything is like an ocean of sound, even then it is silent out there. Every single creature plays its part so well that not one of them, not all of them together, disturb this solemn silence. Out there it is silent. The wood is silent – and even when it whispers, it is silent. Even where the trees are most thickly clustered together they keep their word to each other and keep what is said to themselves... The sea is silent – and even when it roars and is full of noise it is nevertheless silent... When the evening silence rests on the countryside and you hear the distant lowing of the cattle or, far away, hear the homely voice of the farm dog, it cannot be said that this lowing or this voice disturbs the silence: no, it belongs to the silence and is in a secret and to a certain extent

also a silent agreement with silence and thus augments it. (SKS11, 18-9)

Yet this silence reveals something that is neither mere silence nor speech, namely, the silence of the creature in a relation of adoration vis-à-vis its creator.

[W]hat does this silence express? It expresses reverence for God and the fact that He is the One who governs and it is to Him alone that wisdom and understanding belong. And it is precisely because this silence reverences God and, in a manner proper to nature, worships Him, that it is so solemn. And it is because this silence is thus solemn that it is possible to sense God in nature – and so it is no wonder that everything keeps silent out of reverence for Him. Even if *He* does not speak, the fact that everything keeps silent out of reverence for Him affects one as if He were speaking. (SKS11, 22)

Breaking loose from the crowd, then, does not mean isolating oneself in an acosmic solitude. On the contrary, it is going in search of a greater and more encompassing communion than the fragmented social world of modernity can provide, a communion shared with ‘everything’.

‘Before God’ is, as I have said, a strongly spatial metaphor and though it is also to be taken in a more than spatial sense, this spatiality has its own significance. That we are before God, face to face, is to be in the situation of speaking and listening, the situation of dialogue. And even though Kierkegaard is ever mindful of the difficulties of God and human beings speaking together, our apprenticeship in silence is offered as a first step towards such a dialogue. The prayer and the gospel reading are themselves pointers in this direction, as is Kierkegaard’s practice of constantly addressing his reader as ‘Thou’, recalling us to our status as listeners to what God will have to say to us via the words of the discourse. But these words, the words that Kierkegaard has written or imagines himself as speaking, cannot be more than preparatory to the revelation of the divine word before which all creation, including even Kierkegaard himself, must fall silent.

As often, we might worry about an extreme heteronomy driving Kierkegaard's argument here, and our worries might seem confirmed by the demand that silence should bring us to the point even of forgetting ourselves:

And, in silence, may [the gospel] lead you to forget yourself, forget what you yourself are called, forget your own name, whether it is a renowned or an ignominious or an insignificant name, in order silently to pray to God, 'hallowed be *Your* name'! And, in silence, may it bring you to forget yourself, your plans, whether they are great schemes that encompass everything or so narrow as only to concern yourself and your future, in order to silently pray to God, '*Your* Kingdom come'. And, in silence, may it bring you to forget your will, your willfulness, in order to silently pray '*Your* will be done'. (SKS11, 24)

Kierkegaard, I suggest, is in no doubt that if we were to take such a stance to any being other than God, then this would indeed be an intolerable heteronomy. But it is integral to the whole thrust of the discourse that God is precisely the creator who has created us in order that we might be the beings that we are and therefore the God who has from the beginning affirmed our existence as centres of creative freedom. In this context, the hallowing of the divine name is inseparable from the act whereby we accept the liberty and the responsibility that belongs to the gift of life itself. Elsewhere, Kierkegaard had argued that whereas products of human creativity will always remain causally dependent on their creators, God's way of creating is to create beings – human beings – who are free to accept or reject their relation to him. In this perspective, to pray for the coming of the Kingdom is freely to affirm all that is given in the original act of creation and to arouse our own freedom to serve its coming.

I have alluded to Heidegger and to the difference between the Kierkegaardian and Heideggerian points of view. Let me now say more about this. Being-in-the-world, as Heidegger describes it in *Being and Time*, is being that is thrown towards death. Yet, for all its absurdity, Dasein does have the possibility of wanting to know and to speak truthfully about itself and its condition. It is capable of a certain love of truth and this love of truth – *philo-sophia* – is perhaps its highest possibility. However, as we have seen,

the truth to which this leads us is simply our freedom to accept mortality as the defining feature of our existence. Kierkegaard's Christian vision opens another possibility, namely, that our existence is not an absurd facticity but finds its source and goal in 'the look of love' with which the creator constantly and unswervingly regards the creature. In the light of this regard, time is no longer a process of continual annihilation, each empty moment devouring its predecessor, only to be devoured in turn by the next. Instead, it is the possibility of living a life dedicated to love. And, as such, this means that it is also the possibility of a life open to eternity: 'So let the heavens fall and the stars change their places and all things be overthrown, let the bird die and the lily wither – the joy you have in worship and you in your joy will nevertheless *today* survive the end of all things' (SKS11, 48). As the emphatic 'today' suggests, this is not a matter of speculation about what might happen at the end of the world. It is a matter of interpreting an end that is now present: 'For if you remain in God, whether you live or die, whether it goes well with you or badly, as long as you live and whether you die today or only after seventy years... you are never outside God, you *remain*, that is, you are present to yourself, in God, and therefore, even on the day of your death, you are today in paradise' (SKS11, 48). Time, even in its emptiest and most transient moments, is primarily the possibility of affirming this goodness of being 'in paradise'. Knowing ourselves as called to this joy is to know ourselves as called to a consummation that is beyond (our) language, in a silence that is not the denial or simple 'muzzling' of speech but the recalling of speech to its own original and originating ground.

The discourses on the lily and the bird figure this silence in terms of human beings' status *qua* creaturely beings. Yet, as we know ourselves 'proximately and for the most part', more or less corrupted by the mimetic life of the crowd, we seem far from being able to lay hold of this original and continuing possibility. The theology of creation requires the supplement of a theology of redemption, but, for Kierkegaard, redemption, like creation, occurs in the moment in which we turn silently to God, abandoning ego and id, and return his look of love with our silent assent. In scripture, Kierkegaard

seems to find this scenario most concisely set out in the story told in Luke 7 of ‘the sinful woman’ who burst into the dinner-party being held for Jesus by Simon the Pharisee. Ignoring the judgmental gaze of the other guests, she throws herself down at his feet, washing them with her tears and drying them with her hair. As Kierkegaard makes clear in the discourses devoted to this scene, it is probably not accidental that she is a woman, and, as he also says elsewhere, women have a particular aptitude for godly silence (SKS13, 72-6). Again, our modern and postmodern hackles might start to rise. Yet this, as Kierkegaard says, is a matter in which men must ‘learn from a woman’ (SKS12, 263f.). It is with this scene that I concluded my first book on Kierkegaard, and I leave it with you now:

She says nothing, so she is in no way what she says. Rather, she is what she does not say, or what she does not say is what she is, she *is* a sign, like an image: she has forgotten speech and language and the restlessness of thoughts and, what is even more restless, forgotten this self, forgotten herself, she, the lost one who is now lost in her Saviour, lost in resting at his feet, like an image. And it is almost as if the Saviour himself saw her and saw the matter like this, as if she was not an actual person but an image. It was certainly in order to heighten the impact of the application of his words on those who were there that he does not talk to her: he does not say, “Your many sins are forgiven, because you loved much”, but he talks *about* her, he says, “her many sins are forgiven her, because she loved much”. Even though she is present it is almost as if she is absent, it is almost as if he turned her into a picture, a parable...’ (SKS11, 277).

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Returning to the Animal: ***The Christian Discourses* and the Refusal of the Future**

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Abstract. This essay offers a reading of Kierkegaard's discourses on the lily and the birds (from Matthew's gospel) in dialogue with Heidegger's exploration of the animal in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. It argues that a critical link can be made between Kierkegaard's threefold schema of animal, pagan and Christian, and Heidegger's categorisation of stone, animal and world. No direct connection is posited between these, but they are mutually illuminating in the related but distinct ways they deal with issues of human uniqueness and what it means to relate freely and meaningfully to a world. Both thinkers remain committed to a version of anthropocentrism while trying to disrupt settled notions of what it means to be human; ultimately, however, it is argued that Kierkegaard redirects the attention of the reader in a more radically non-humanistic way.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, Heidegger, animal, animality, humanism.

‘Paganism forms the opposition to Christianity, but the lily and the bird form no opposition to either of these contending parties – they play outside . . .’¹ (CD 9)

These words are from the introduction to Part One of Kierkegaard's *Christian Discourses*, which is titled ‘The Cares of the Pagans’. It sets up the threefold structure which organises each of the individual discourses which follow. There is the pagan: full of worldly anxiety and forgetful of God. There is the Christian: freed from such care and lostness by becoming nothing before God. And then we have, taken together, the lily and the bird:

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¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses/ The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 9.

characters from the gospel text of Matthew chapter 6, whose role is to be our teachers.

The lily and the bird are unusual teachers. They do not address us directly; rather we are repeatedly urged to look at them, to consider them, to pay attention to them. More radically, of course, they seem to be so far below the level of human religious striving, that having them in such a text appears to be a joke. The introduction explicitly recognises this – and, later, Kierkegaard calls the lily and the bird a ‘superfluity’.²

This threefold structure, then – pagan, Christian, lily and bird – is an unusual one. Is it a hierarchy, a progression, a dialectic? However we define such things, the lily and bird do not seem to fit: they are outside opposition. They do not work by any logic of comparison. And, of course, this is partly the point: these are teachers of the good news that we do not need to live by the rules of craving and anxiety, which are so rooted in comparison – whether that is comparison between people or between this day and the future.

So: the lily and bird are superfluous. And yet: there is comparison, of a sort. Through paying attention to them, the difference between the pagan and the Christian is thrown into relief. And the superiority of the Christian over the lily and bird is affirmed: what they are by nature, the Christian is by choice.

My aim here, then, is to explore the stakes of this tension: between the lily and bird as beyond all comparison and opposition on the one hand; and, on the other, the way they are still part of drawing distinctions.

I am going to do this in conversation with Heidegger. Now, as we know, Heidegger famously said that there is more to be learned philosophically from Kierkegaard’s edifying writings than his theoretical ones, with the exception of *The Concept of Anxiety*.³ But I have a more

² On the rhetorical and dialogical form of Kierkegaard’s discourse material, see George Pattison, *Kierkegaard’s Upbuilding Discourses: Philosophy, literature and theology* (London: Routledge, 2002).

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 278n.

specific thought in mind: and this concerns the role played by nonhuman life in defining what is distinctive about human existence.

Why take this focus? First: I want to argue that what Kierkegaard says about the pagan, the lily/bird and the Christian is echoed by what Heidegger says about the stone, the animal and the human. I am not claiming that there is any direct line of dependency here: but Heidegger's respect for the edifying discourses is at least suggestive of the possibility that he is drawing on Kierkegaard's insights for his own work.

If that was all I had to say, it might be of passing academic interest, but no more. So, secondly, I aim to draw out the contrasts and tensions between Kierkegaard and Heidegger, and the reasons for this. And thirdly, I will argue that the animal – here standing for nonhuman life in general – plays an ambiguous role for each thinker. In some ways, both thinkers still want to privilege the possibilities of human existence; but they are both aware that traditional ways of doing this only serve to prop up human delusions about their own superiority, and a refusal to face human despair and craving. They approach the animal, not just to domesticate it, to use it to assert human worth, but in a spirit of attentiveness, of aliveness to the question posed to us by the nonhuman. Both fall back into unreflective ways of thinking which place the human at the centre of the world; but it is ultimately Kierkegaard, I claim, who offers the clearest vision of our way out of this impasse. I will end by sketching out how I think he does this. Contrary to how we might often read Kierkegaard as stressing temporality and striving into an unknown future, I will argue that the lily and bird teach us to refuse the future as the source of our comparative anxiety.

So, these three elements will be woven together: first, seeing how Kierkegaard and Heidegger echo one another; second, exploring the differences and tensions; and third arguing for the encounter with the nonhuman as the way out of anxiety.

Very little attention has been paid to Kierkegaard's attitude to nonhuman creatures. An exception is an article by Darren Zook, which explores the moral status of animals through various tropes in the authorship.

My approach here is different, in that I am not focused so much on Kierkegaard's direct evaluation of animals as his invitation to the reader to encounter their otherness, and so to undermine our presumptions. That said, I share with Zook a concern for the polyvalence of Kierkegaard's imagery, and echo attention to 'a persistent and unresolved inconsistency in Kierkegaard's views on the moral status of nonhuman species that partially compromises the integrity of his larger philosophical projects.'⁴

Heidegger's evocation

The text in which Heidegger explores animality in most detail is *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*.⁵ His reason for doing so is to clarify what is meant by the concept of world, and through that to evoke Dasein's proper mode of being. Straight away, we can see that the animal is being used as a means to an end. But Heidegger is not just going to replicate traditional ways of asserting human superiority over animals. Such an approach would be superficial, treating humans and animals as sets of characteristics which could be quantified. It would reduce them to naturalised objects, and so it would not get to the *Being* of Dasein.⁶

So, Heidegger rejects crude forms of anthropocentrism. The animal should be understood on its own terms, in terms of the being essential to it. And this is in keeping with his philosophical approach in this text. He

⁴ Darren C. Zook, 'Kierkegaard's Zoo: Humanity, Nature, and the Moral Status of Animals' in *History of Philosophy Quarterly* July 2006, Vol. 23 No. 3, 263 – 276: 263.

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, trans. William McNeil and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). For fuller discussions of Heidegger's writing on animality and further literature, see Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) and Marc Fellenz, *Moral Menagerie: Philosophy and Animal Rights* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

⁶ Due to the necessity for focusing this essay, and the relevance of the material, I am limiting myself to this earlier phase of Heidegger's work where the analytic of Dasein is central. This leaves open the strong possibility of whether Heidegger's later work (including his meditations on the 'fourfold') open up more radical breaks with anthropocentric thinking. With thanks to Duane Williams for clarifying this point.

continually rails against the kind of philosophy which is just about writing books which take detached positions about their objects. Instead, Heidegger calls us into a fundamental experience. As he puts it, the task of philosophizing is ‘*not to describe the consciousness of man but to evoke the Dasein in man*’. This can only be done through questioning – not the kind of questioning which expects a direct answer, but one which is ‘*capable of keeping this interrogative space open*’.⁷

This is, then, an evocative text: it calls to us. Prior to the long section on animal life, Heidegger has approached his task by exploring boredom. He is not interested in boredom as a merely psychological state, but in what it reveals to us about the nature of Being and our relationship to Being. Boredom is an attunement, a way in which Being resonates within us, even as it refuses to be disclosed to us. At its most profound level, boredom is that state in which beings as a whole refuse themselves to us, but do so in a way which is ‘telling’ – a way which evokes the possibility of our access to being.

This is what leads Heidegger to consider the notion of world, since, in its basic form, the world for any entity is those beings which are accessible to it. And what emerges from this definition is a further set of problems: what does *access* to beings mean or consist of?

In turning to the nonhuman, Heidegger sets aside the phenomenological approach he has taken so far, and opts for a comparative one. The aim is to allow Dasein to be evoked in its essence; this can be done by paying attention to Dasein’s fundamental moods, but also through a kind of comparison, in which the proper essence of Dasein comes to light.

Thus, we arrive at the well-known thesis about the stone, the animal and the human. The stone is worldless. The animal is poor in world. The human is world forming. Instantly, before we get into the details of what this means, we seem to have a hierarchy. Perhaps the words are different, but the old philosophical anthropocentrism appears to be at play.⁸

⁷ Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts*, p. 174.

⁸ Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts*, pp. 176ff. The ongoing anthropocentrism of the text is a key focus for Jacques Derrida in *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, trans. David Willis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); see also Calarco, *Zoographies*.

But it is important to recognise that Heidegger genuinely wants to avoid this dogmatic anthropocentrism. And there are two main reasons for this.

First, this is not simply a case of saying humans are rational, animals are not. Rationality and consciousness – at least in the way the philosophical tradition has often defined them – are not the defining attributes of the human as *Dasein*. The characterisation of the human as conscious rational subject over against an objective world is a metaphysical error. It obscures the fundamental relatedness of *Dasein* to its world. And it turns beings into mere objects to be grasped and represented by an ego. This image of thought drains existence of its relationality and access to being as such. It is no exaggeration to say that, for Heidegger, it is at the root of Western nihilism.

Secondly, and more positively, Heidegger insists that he is not defining the animal merely in relation to the human, but seeking its own essence. Animality does not need humanity to be what it is. Moreover, keeping the question of animality open also helps us to avoid falling back into dogmatic, reductionist accounts of either animal life or human existence.

Both of these points relate to the basic orientation of Heidegger's text. While – unusually for him – he engages at some length with biology and zoology, he is not seeking an objective description or analysis of animal and human being. His aim is to clear the space for an evocation, to invite us to be shaken, even terrorised out of our habitual insensitivity to Being.

Resonances and Tensions

There are general resonances with Kierkegaard's discourses here, despite all the obvious differences of form and tone: Kierkegaard too is writing to call us out of a life view which is closed in on itself, lost in inessential chatter, or burdened by the anxiety of passing time. Writing to upbuild, Kierkegaard lacks both detachment and authority. The upbuilding draws us out into self-activity, evokes or awakens a capacity for resolution, for patience, for joy.

However, beyond these generalities, there are more specific connections. As we have seen, Heidegger offers a threefold account of how the beings relate to a world. The stone has no access to world; the human actively forms a world, relates to it as such: it has a hermeneutic of the world. The animal is in a middle position: it clearly relates to and interacts with what is around it, but for Heidegger it lacks the capacity to encounter beings as beings. The animal lives in what Heidegger calls a disinhibiting ring: different beings provide stimuli which draw the animal, out of its organic capacities, into instinctual activity. But it cannot form its world through active interpretation; it cannot project its understanding on the world or itself.

Now compare this account to the way Kierkegaard sets up the relationship between pagan, Christian and lily/bird: ‘Compared with the bird’s lightness, the pagan is heavily burdened like a stone; compared with the Christian’s freedom, the bird is still subject to the law of gravity’.⁹ Or again: ‘The bird is the light, the transient traveller. The rich Christian who became ignorant travelled ceaselessly and further away. The rich pagan remained heavy, like a stone, upon the earth . . .’¹⁰

The bird functions as a teacher here because it is carefree. It simply is what it is, without anxiety. It falls below the level of the Christian, who relates to God with an awareness of God as God, because the Christian has *become* what he is through resolution. But it soars over the pagan, who is bound to the earth: a stone. Now, on one level, calling the pagan a stone is metaphorical, whereas Heidegger is concerned with the being of actual stones. But I think it is significant: the pagan is stone-like because he is bound, stunned into insensitivity to what is other by his self-inclosed anxiety. Despite this anxiety, the pagan is, in a sense, asleep: locked in a dream world in which he sees only according to his own measure. The pagan, says Kierkegaard ‘never moves from the spot’, in the sense of being fixated in self-torment.¹¹ As Heidegger also recognises, the human can sink lower than the beast: in forgetting spirit, the pagan bypasses the bird and falls into the

⁹ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, p. 22.

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, p. 35.

¹¹ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, p. 79.

condition of the stone: his human preoccupations should not mislead us, because it is precisely these preoccupations which deny him access to what is other than himself. The pagan lacks a world.

Kierkegaard's concerns here are different from Heidegger's, but there is a connection: Kierkegaard too is calling human being into question, and, by means of the comparative analysis, seeking to call it into its most intense mode of existence. The animal is a waymarker. Attending to it can point us away from our despair and evasion; but ultimately, it must be left behind. As human, we can never be the animal (Heidegger writes of the difficulty of transposing ourselves into the being of the animal), and, indeed, this is not the point: we exist, we project ourselves beyond immediacy, and our salvation lies in recovering a new immediacy on the other side of reflection. The animal is a signpost, but never a destination.

However, this is not the whole story. At the end of Heidegger's exploration of animality, he sounds a note of caution. In aiming to uncover the essence of Dasein, has he missed the essence of the animal? It may only be from the human perspective, he admits, that the animal is seen as poor in world; although he does then attempt to sidestep that objection by arguing that it was the development of the human essence he had in mind all along.¹²

As for Kierkegaard, the tension is closely related to the problem of comparison. Comparison is, after all, a root of our anxiety, our dissatisfaction with being what we are, our distraction by the haunting future. The bird and lily offer an image of life without comparison, life which is what it is without having to project itself into alternative possibilities. However, in order for that image to work, we have to engage in precisely what it seems to warn us against; we have to compare ourselves to the bird, the bird is compared to the pagan and the Christian.

Is this a performative contradiction in Kierkegaard's text? Rather than answer that question directly, I want to approach it sideways, by drawing out what I think are some of the modes in which the lily and the bird

¹² Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts*, pp. 270 ff.

function as teachers. There are two of these modes I think are especially significant: looking and expressing.

Looking and Expressing

Looking is perhaps the more obvious mode of how the lily and the bird teach: we are repeatedly instructed to look at them. And this is not a casual glance, nor a look of detached and analytical investigation. It is the look of attentiveness, a being-with the nonhuman in order to let it affect us and re-orient us. Turning our gaze from the concerns in front of us and the future anxiety taunts us with, we give our patient attention to the lily and the bird. The mode of looking is important, because it is not simply a relationship between perceiving subject and perceived object; but a transformation of what attention is. It stands in contrast with the worried glance or oppressed stare of the pagan, who is ‘continually looking ahead’ – and precisely because of this, falls into the pit.¹³

This look is not direct; the question is *how* we look. The rich pagan ‘sees only in darkness’. The bird ‘sees nothing’ thanks to its blissful ignorance, the rich Christian also ‘sees nothing’, because earthly distinctions lose their validity and definition in the perspective of the eternal.¹⁴ This unseeing answer to the invisibility of God. In ‘The Care of Lowliness’, Kierkegaard refers to Christ as the prototype. The Christian does not see the prototype with his own eyes, but nevertheless ‘he often sees the prototype’ – every time poverty and lowliness are forgotten in joy, ‘then he does see the prototype – and then he himself looks more or less like the prototype’.¹⁵ Christ, then, is not seen directly, but expressed in the joy which forgets distinctions. The virtues – of patience, faith, humility, love – are intrinsic to the quality of the look, a looking which does not see directly.

The look, of course, is intimately related to the moment. In Danish and German, the moment is literally the glance of an eye. It is in connection

¹³ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, p. 21.

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, p. 35.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, p. 43.

with the moment that Heidegger invokes Kierkegaard in *Fundamental Concepts*. The claim he makes is a grand one: ‘What we here designate as ‘moment of vision’ is what was really comprehended for the first time in philosophy by Kierkegaard – a comprehending with which the possibility of a completely new epoch of philosophy has begun for the first time since antiquity.’¹⁶ For Heidegger, we are driven to the possibility of this moment of vision by the experience of a mood such as profound boredom: the moment is the resolute disclosure of Dasein to itself. The moment is the gateway to an authentic expression of Dasein’s essence.

Kierkegaard of course writes about the moment in various works, but it appears several times in the 1849 discourses on the lily and bird. ‘[O]nly by silence does one find the moment,’ we are told – in fact ‘the moment *is* only in silence’.¹⁷ The moment cannot be anticipated by our ordinary projects and plans. It interrupts the flow of life – and it is striking that Kierkegaard uses an animal metaphor here: ‘it comes softly, with a lighter step than the lightest footfall of any creature’. In the second of these discourses, we read that the bird ‘understands only one thing, but understands it unconditionally – that now is the unconditional moment’.¹⁸

Here, I think we are beginning to see Kierkegaard moving in a more fundamentally different direction to that of Heidegger. Heidegger’s animal can only ever be deprived, from our point of view, whatever wonderful capacities it has. It is inscribed within the circle of instinct and denied access to being as such. And this means the moment of vision remains subordinate to a human perspective: it returns Dasein to itself, discloses it to itself, but renders it less capable of genuine encounter with what exceeds the human. The vision is turned inward.

Of course, Kierkegaard too is often concerned to emphasise human distinctiveness; but another note sounds throughout these discourses. The lily and bird really do ‘play outside’ the scope of human determinations,

¹⁶ Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts*, p. 150.

¹⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 14.

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, p. 29.

comparisons. They call into question the advantage of self-conscious awareness or language. Without guile or effort, they are the best possible teachers, who teach by being what they are. As David Kangas puts it, ‘the lily and the bird can intervene in order to reorganise the human gaze upon itself’.¹⁹

This is all very well, you may say, but surely all of this still serves a human end. Kierkegaard has no interest – much less even than Heidegger – in real flesh and blood animals. They are merely ciphers, a blank canvas on to which we symbolically project alternative modes of existence. We look at them, but the look is never returned.

This is a common criticism of the philosophical tradition of drawing radical distinctions between humans and animals. For one thing, as Derrida often pointed out, it is a form of conceptual violence to reduce all the immense, evolving diversity of nonhuman life to the single category of the animal. For another, it flies in the face of mounting ethological evidence which ascribes to different animal species various forms of complex communication, social rites, tool use, future planning, mourning, play, deception and so on.

There is undoubtedly some truth in applying this critique to Kierkegaard. However, I think it underestimates the way in which the lily and bird ‘play outside’ the game of human comparison. This genuine otherness is underlined by their lack of concern for our spiritual projects. If they do not ‘look’ at us, this is not a matter of the actual focus of their eyes, but of their indifference to the play of glances which constitutes the human, intersubjective realm.

In Kierkegaard’s zoo, the assumption is that animals exist in their cages, whether real or imaginary, to be regarded and looked upon by watchful, reflective human eyes. The unintended implications are quite different, and in true Kierkegaardian fashion, they seem full of anxiety-producing potential: perhaps in Kierkegaard’s zoo,

¹⁹ David Kangas, *Errant Affirmations: On the Philosophical Meaning of Kierkegaard's Religious Discourses* (London and NY: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 123.

humans, too, are in cages, and when they cast their reflective gaze out onto other nonhuman species, they must continually ponder the meaning of the moment when the gaze is returned.²⁰

Just now, I quoted a reference to the unconditional moment in which the bird lives. It is this unconditionality of which the lily and bird are not merely an arbitrary symbol, but a living expression.

This is most explicit in the 1849 discourses, which focus on the qualities of silence, obedience and joy. In being silent, the bird is not literally noiseless, but devoid of human chatter and distraction. And when it is objected that this is easy for the lily and bird as they cannot speak, the discourse responds ‘You are not to say that’, but to exist before God and so ‘fold up all your plans into less space than a period’.²¹ There is silence in nature even ‘when the day vibrates with a thousand strings and everything is like a sea of sound’. Of the sea itself, we read that it would be an injustice to say it roared – we would be listening in the wrong way: ‘If however, you take time and listen more carefully, you hear – how amazing! – you hear silence’.²² In this paradox of hearing, the bird says ‘everything will take place in due season; but Kierkegaard adds ‘yet, no, the bird does not say this; it is silent, but its silence is expressive [*talende*], and its silence says that it believes it’.²³ In this silence it knows when the moment comes.

The bird says by not saying. This is not a learned ignorance, not the overcoming of the distractions of reflection - but it *is* nevertheless an expression, a saying which interrupts our language and ruptures our world. In this expressive silence, there is ‘something divine’.

This unconditional expressive veneration is not to be diluted with comparisons and rationalisations. Nor is the unconditional obedience of the second discourse, because the lily and bird know the unconditioned in a

²⁰ Zook, ‘Kierkegaard’s Zoo’, p. 274. This invokes a whole tradition of mediation upon the animal gaze, notably in Derrida *The Animal that Therefore I am* and, classically, in John Berger, *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009).

²¹ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, p. 17.

²² Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, p. 13.

²³ *Ibid.*

masterly way.²⁴ And when the third discourse speaks of the unconditional joy of the lily and bird, Kierkegaard stresses that, in living wholly in the present, the gospel teachers ‘certainly are not thoughtless’.²⁵

Where, in the earlier discourses, there was always a reminder that the Christian was, in a sense, higher than the lily and bird, here there is an implicit refusal of this way of thinking. It is a distraction; the Gospel says, you *shall* learn from them. They are not thoughtless; they communicate and express the unconditional by being what they teach. Human reflection cannot dismiss this as merely instinctive, or easy or less significant: no, it must go *derude*: out there – and learn from the lily and the bird, without correlating them to human projects and preconceptions. The future must be silenced, so that the unconditional may speak.

Conclusion

Both Kierkegaard and Heidegger, I have suggested, can be charged with introducing nonhumans into their texts for merely instrumental reasons: to clarify human distinctiveness, or to be symbolic catalysts for human upbuilding. The structural similarities between their accounts – whatever the differences of tone and content – reinforce such distinctions. They can both be challenged for their unreflective investment into a human-animal binary, and for failing really to attend to the nonhuman other.

However, I have argued that there is much more to the work of both thinkers than just continuing the narrative of human superiority. It may seem that Heidegger is the more promising in this respect: he does want to attend to the essence of animality itself, and is aware of the limitations of his approach. Ultimately, he does not manage to square this circle, but he provides impetus to further philosophical encounters with animality in its otherness.

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, p. 26.

²⁵ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, p. 38.

In this light, Kierkegaard's discourses appear much more narrowly focused on human edification. He presupposes that the structures of human spirit and reflection make the task of our existence the central drama of creation. There is none of Heidegger's interest in engaging with zoology; the lily and the bird are merely figurative devices to change the focus of our awareness.

Nevertheless, I have argued that the way Kierkegaard turns to the lily and bird starts to unpick these anthropocentric truisms. For one thing, what they direct us towards radically calls into question what we have assumed the human to be: we are built up – to become nothing before God; or, as David Kangas argues, we are led to the lily and bird to unlearn our way of being human, to let go of the projects and plans by which we attempt to construct a purpose in life, and to embrace instead the 'whylessness', the gracious purposelessness of the moment. The moment cannot be assimilated into any existing temporal horizon or structure of anticipation. Rather than the moment launching us on to an anguished path of striving for a future end, it launches us into an unconditional silence, in which we 'let reality be the criterion of itself...let it unfold as it will unfold'.²⁶ It is precisely as superfluities that the lily and bird teach us this much.

But this suggests we need to take a further step: the nonhuman can't merely be a means to an end, the symbolic ladder we climb to attain this liberated state, only to leave it behind. Kierkegaard increasingly calls us really to look at the nonhuman; to hear what it expresses; to submit to its authority; to be exposed to the different thought it articulates. In this vision, nature is not merely the sublime backdrop to human striving, but the resonant being to which we belong. Here, outside, under the sign of expressive play, there is certainly contingency, suffering and hardship, but they no longer amplify in the dead and empty spaces of an all too human future. For Heidegger, Dasein is world forming because it asks the question of Being and so access beings as such. But as Nicola Masciandaro argues, *all* life takes

²⁶ Kangas, *Errant Affirmations*, p. 149.

place ‘in the space of, or *as* the question, above all, the question of itself, of its being itself’.²⁷ *Really* to attend to the nonhuman is to hear this implicit question, this surprise and joy over the sheer fact *that one is*. This questioning outstrips our stubborn trust in human reflective capacities, which funnel the question into discursive and teleological forms (‘for what future do we exist?’). Rather, ‘Examining the fundamental structure of questioning leads more and more into in- and transhuman zones where the question of what the question is has already flown the cage of autonomous reflective consciousness’.²⁸ The question precedes us: it is already there when we look at nature as the expression of what there is, as resonance in dissonance, as joy in suffering, as what is said and thought in the lily and the bird’s being and playing-in-the-world.

Here we need to surrender the superficiality of human reflection to a more intuitive knowing, in which, to echo Meister Eckhart, all creatures speak God. *How* we look at creation matters; but that how is made possible by a creaturely presence which pre-exists our reflection. Our staring into the future must be interrupted, our eyes filled with what flies free, so that our self-concern may be emptied. It brings to mind a passage from Iris Murdoch’s *The Sovereignty of Good*:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel.²⁹

²⁷ Nicola Masciandaro, ‘Unknowing Animals’ in Michael Austin et al (eds), *Speculations II* (Earth: punctum books, 2020), pp. 228-244: 235.

²⁸ Masciandaro, ‘Unknowing Animals’, p. 237.

²⁹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 82.

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Learning to Face Death Earnestly: Kierkegaard's Critique of Inauthentic Conceptions of Death in "At a Graveside"

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Abstract. This article catalogues the inauthentic strategies human beings employ to avoid confronting the inevitability of death. The identification of these inauthentic strategies provides the basis for considering two issues raised by "At a Graveside", the third discourse in *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*. Firstly, the article explores Kierkegaard's notion of "earnestness" and his claim that it is only by learning to face death earnestly that human beings can live meaningful and worthwhile lives. Secondly, the article addresses the puzzle of the almost complete omission of Christian categories in "At a Graveside" by arguing that Kierkegaard has adopted an intentionally "this-worldly" strategy in order to avoid the Christian hope of an afterlife itself becoming an inauthentic strategy for addressing death. Christian categories can be introduced only after carrying out a preparatory non-Christian reflection on death, which creates the earnestness that is necessary if human beings are to live authentically in the face of the inevitability of death.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, death, earnestness, authenticity, inauthenticity, afterlife, Christianity.

We must all die. Death could call now, as I am writing these words or as you are reading them. Although we may not know the exact time of

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death's arrival, death is an inescapable fact of human existence. From conception onwards each of us begins a journey that will conclude with our extinction. As the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* puts it, "In the midst of life we are in death."¹

The fact that human beings' lives must inevitably end in death raises the question of how we should live our lives in the face of this sombre fact. Reflecting on this question in the midst of a pandemic has particular poignancy. The answer Kierkegaard gives is that each of us should relate to death with *Alvor*. This noun and its adjectival and adverbial form *alvorlig* are translated in the Princeton University Press translations as *earnestness*, *earnest*, and *earnestly* respectively. Alternative translations of *Alvor* are *seriousness* and *gravity*. All three of these possible translations express how we should relate to death. Death is a topic we should treat with earnestness, seriousness, and gravity. But what does this entail? Kierkegaard explores this question in several of his works and in many journal entries.² In this paper, however, I wish to focus on Kierkegaard's most sustained treatment of death, namely the third discourse of *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, "At a Graveside."

This discourse has become the subject of some significant studies in recent years.³ These investigations have shed light on the discourse's treatment of the aporetic nature of Kierkegaard's conception of death (Mjaaland, 2003); the upbuilding character of death (Theunissen, 2006); the connection between Kierkegaard's notion of death and that of Rilke (Hale, 2002), Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida (Mjaaland, 2006), and Blanchot (Michaelsen, 2014); the relationship of Kierkegaard's concept of retroactivity to Epicurus and analytic philosophy's conception of death (Stokes, 2006); the different temporalities present in "At a Graveside" (Connell, 2006); and the problematic disparagement of mood and lack of

¹ "The Order for the Burial of the Dead," *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 395.

² For a general survey of Kierkegaard's treatment of the theme of death in his entire authorship, journals, and papers see Buben, 2014. Studies of Kierkegaard's discussion of death in individual works can be found in Stokes and Buben, 2011.

³ An earlier study of "At a Graveside" can be found in Theunissen, 1958, 140-7. See also the treatment in Birkenstock, 1997.

sociality in Kierkegaard's understanding of death (Marino, 2011). My intention is not to reproduce the contribution of these studies, but to add to the discussion in two ways.

The first aim of the present article is to isolate and distinguish between the various illegitimate strategies Kierkegaard pinpoints in "At a Graveside" that human beings employ to avoid facing up to death. Accompanying this first aim of the article is the related objective of identifying what Kierkegaard considers to be the true way of living meaningful and worthwhile lives in the face of death. We shall frame this debate in terms of the dichotomy between authenticity and inauthenticity. These terms are associated with Heidegger, or rather with the English translation of Heidegger's terms *Eigentlichkeit*, *eigentlich* and *uneigentlich*, which he employs to describe the manner in which human beings relate to death. These German terms capture something of the conceptual content of Kierkegaard's term *Alvor*, namely that an earnest relationship to death entails appropriating the thought of one's death and making it one's own (*eigen*), a notion which is at the root of the Heidegger's employment of *Eigentlichkeit* and its cognates.⁴ If we express Kierkegaard's notion of earnestness in Heidegger's terminology, *Alvor* can be conceived of as the means by which the individual takes *ownership* of his/her death. Although the English term "authenticity" does not capture the meaning of ownership contained in Heidegger's German terminology, it expresses well another feature of Kierkegaard's conception of earnestness, namely, that earnestness involves *being true* or rather *becoming true to oneself*. What this becoming true to oneself entails and how the thought of death facilitates this trueness or authenticity is a major theme of the present article.

⁴ Heidegger's notion of death and his conception of the human being or *Dasein* as "Being-towards-death" are, of course, indebted to Kierkegaard, as Heidegger himself implies when he states in the context of his discussion of *Dasein* as "Being-towards-death" that, "there is more to be learned philosophically from his 'edifying' writings than from his theoretical ones with the exception of his treatise on the concept of anxiety" (Heidegger, 1962, 494, n. vi). Theunissen may well be right in his suggestion that in making this remark "Heidegger was especially thinking of the discourse *At a Graveside*" (Theunissen, 2006, p. 328).

Our second aim is to find an explanation for a puzzling feature of “At a Graveside”. Several scholars have drawn attention to the almost complete omission in “At a Graveside” of references to the Christian hope of an afterlife (see, e.g., Marino, 2011, p. 155).⁵ In a discourse that opens with Kierkegaard alluding to a funeral address (*SKS* 5, 442, 444 / *TDIO*, 71, 73) and the committal of the deceased (*SKS* 5, 444 / *TDIO*, 73), presumably by the officiating priest, we might expect the text to contain references to the Christian doctrine of the resurrection. This, however, is not the case. On the contrary, the priest makes no mention of the Christian hope of an afterlife, but preaches precisely the opposite, namely, the finality of death. The discourse opens with the blunt assertion “Then all is over!” (*SKS* 5, 442 / *TDIO*, 71). The conclusion of the account of the funeral ends with the same words. Once the deceased has been committed to the earth, Kierkegaard states, “and then all is over” (*SKS* 5, 444 / *TDIO*, 73). From the Christian perspective, however, all is not over with death and burial. Why, then, is Christianity so downplayed in “At a Graveside”?

The non-Christian character of “At a Graveside” would seem to be confirmed by the paucity of Christian terminology in the discourse. Other than brief references to “recollecting God” (*SKS* 5, 442 / *TDIO*, 71) and “equality before God” (*SKS* 5, 458-9 / *TDIO*, 90), Christian concepts are conspicuous by their absence. Indeed, there even appear to be some *anti-Christian* elements in the discourse. Thus, Kierkegaard corrects John the Baptist’s warning that every tree that does not bear fruit will be cut down (Matt. 3.10) by adding “no, every tree will be cut down, *also the one that*

⁵ The failure of the contributors to Stokes and Buben, 2011, to address the relationship between those writings where Kierkegaard treats death from a this-worldly perspective and those where he demonstrates belief in the possibility of an afterlife is raised by Rick Anthony Furtak in his review of the aforementioned work. Furtak ends his review with a question and a request: “Although there is clearly a form of Kierkegaardian existential faith that does not deny our finitude, what about the other elements of Kierkegaard’s work that seem to conflict with this? By ending with this question, I don’t mean to imply that I know how to answer it -- but someone ought to” (Furtak, 2012). The present article is in part a first and tentative attempt to answer Furtak’s question, though limited to a discussion of “At a Graveside”. As Furtak indicates, a fuller study is needed that examines the relationship between this-worldly and other-worldly conceptions of death and afterlife in the entire Kierkegaardian corpus.

bears good fruit” (SKS 5, 462 / TDIO, 93, emphasis added). Kierkegaard even includes Paul’s description of sin as “the wages of sin” (Rom. 6.23) among the “descriptive names” human beings employ to avoid confronting the unsettling power of death. Another such descriptive name is the conception of death as “a transformation”. If this is an allusion to 1 Cor. 15.51-52, “We will not all die, but we will all be changed,” then “At a Graveside” could even be read as an implicit critique of the doctrine of resurrection.

The present article’s two aims of identifying inauthentic strategies for coping with the thought of death and explaining the absence of Christian terminology in “At a Graveside” are connected. It is my contention that it is precisely because he wishes to critique inadequate and dishonest strategies for addressing death that Kierkegaard reduces the Christian elements to a minimum. Before we defend this claim, however, our first task is to sketch Kierkegaard’s understanding of death in “At a Graveside”.

The concept of death in “At a Graveside”

What is death? This is an unanswerable question. We cannot say what death is, for when death is, we are not. This prompts Kierkegaard to concern himself in “At a Graveside” not with death as such, but with what he calls “death’s decision” (SKS 5, 447 / TDIO, 76), namely, the decision that death makes to end a human life. Although we cannot understand death, we are able to explore how the human being lives in face of death’s decision. How should we live our lives in light of the fact that death could decide to come today or perhaps many years in the future? Kierkegaard considers the nature of death’s decision under the three headings of “decisiveness”, “indefinability,” and “inexplicability.”

1. The Decisiveness of Death’s Decision

The phrase “decisiveness of death’s decision” appears at first sight to be a tautology, since the notion of “decisiveness” would seem to be contained

in the concept of “decision.” The term “decisiveness” is not redundant, however, but is included by Kierkegaard in order to place clearly before the reader’s eyes the *absoluteness* of death’s decision. “The repetition of the word is significant”, Kierkegaard comments, for, “[t]here is many another decision in life, but only one is decisive the way death’s decision is” (SKS 5, 448 / TDIO, 78). In short, when we speak of death’s decision, we are not speaking of one decision among many others, but of a decision that is qualitatively different from all the other decisions that take place in life. Death’s decision is decisive because it brings everything to a halt. When death intervenes, there is no escape, no hiding place. In Kierkegaard’s words, “When death comes, the word is: Up to here, not one step further; then it is concluded, not a letter is added; the meaning is at an end and not one more sound is to be heard – all is over” (SKS 5, 449 / TDIO, 78-9). A further aspect of death’s decisiveness is death’s immutability. Death remains unchanged amidst all the changing circumstances of the world. “It does not become paler or older” (SKS 5, 449/ TDIO, 79), Kierkegaard observes, but remains unchanged and utterly unmoved by human beings. The human being could plead with death for clemency, could beg for a little more time, could appeal to a sense of justice – all of this is in vain. Death is impassive, death cannot be persuaded, death does not vacillate, and death’s decision cannot be revoked. There is no indecision in death’s decision.

2. *The Indefinability of Death*

Death is indefinable and all human attempts to define death are illusory. Human beings, however, sometimes attempt to define death by speaking of death’s *equality*. This view of death stems from the fact that death does not discriminate between human beings, but takes all – rich and poor, old and young, good and bad. This notion of the equality of death, however, is not a genuine definition of death, for the conventional notion of the equality death brings is dependent on our recalling the *inequalities of life*. Human conceptions of death thus stem not from death itself but from life and the inequalities human beings experience in life. The equality of death,

however, resides not in the cancellation of earthly differences but in the *absolute* annihilation of the individual troubled by life's iniquities. Since we are annihilated in death, the equality of death is a nothingness that we do not and cannot experience. Kierkegaard comments, "Because of its equality, death's decision is like an empty space and like a silence in which nothing is heard, or it is toned down like a silence that is not disturbed" (*SKS* 5, 455 / *TDIO*, 85). Death does not allow itself to be defined but commands silence (*SKS* 5, 455 / *TDIO*, 85-6). We are left confronting the sheer indefinability of death.

There is, however, an equality of death that arises from death itself rather than from the longing of the despairing individual for equality in life. This equality stems from death's radical individualization of human beings. No human being can hide in the background or take refuge in the crowd, for, Kierkegaard comments, "behold, death takes each one separately – and he becomes silent" (*SKS* 5, 455 / *TDIO*, 86). When death is thought in earnestness it isolates the thinker.

... no comparison is as earnest as the comparison of the one who, alone, compares himself with the equality of death. Alone, because that is indeed what death makes him when the grave is closed, when the cemetery gate is shut, when night falls and he lies alone, far away from all sympathy, unrecognizable in the shape that can evoke only a shudder, alone out there where the multitude of the dead do not form any kind of society. (*SKS* 5, 458 / *TDIO*, 89).

In death the human being is thus utterly alone. Death's isolation of every human being is the only sense in which it is proper to speak of the equality of death.

If death is not definable by means of human conceptions of equality, is it then possible to define death in terms of *inequality*? Kierkegaard thinks not. He comments that, "Just as death's decision is *not definable* by *equality*, so it is likewise *not definable* by *inequality*" (*SKS* 5, 460, cf. 462 / *TDIO*, 91, cf. 93; original emphasis). This is because human beings are simply incapable of grasping the nature of death's inequality. With regard to death,

Kierkegaard points out, “no age or circumstance or life situation is a safeguard against it” (*SKS* 5, 462 / *TDIO*, 93). It is unfathomable why death should take the baby but leave the old man to linger on (*SKS* 5, 460 / *TDIO*, 91). Although we can recognize the inequality of death’s treatment of human beings, we are incapable of detecting any logic, pattern, or reason for death’s unequal treatment of human beings. To attempt to define death in terms of inequality is thus merely a circumlocution for the indefinability of death. Death is indefinable and will always remain so because it is simultaneously certain and uncertain. It is certain that death will come, but it is uncertain *when* death will come. It could be today, in the midst of writing or reading these words, or it could be in ten, twenty, or thirty years’ time. Despite the decisiveness of death’s decision, namely that we know that death will inevitably come, we can never define the point in time when it will at last arrive.

In short, neither equality nor inequality is a concept that can grasp the nature of death. Human definitions of death in terms of equality and inequality collapse in the face of death’s uncertain certainty. Death is a law unto itself and remains a mystery which human thought cannot penetrate. Kierkegaard concludes, “So death is indefinable – the only certainty, and the only thing about which nothing is certain” (*SKS* 5, 460 / *TDIO*, 91).

3. The Inexplicability of Death’s Decision

Death is inexplicable. This inexplicability is not due to our lack of knowledge or intelligence. Death is not a puzzle waiting to be solved by clever human beings, and death’s “inexplicability is not a request to solve enigmas, an invitation to be ingenious” (*SKS* 5, 468 / *TDIO*, 100). Death is inexplicable, because death has no need of explanation and refuses to provide human beings with any explanation of itself. Kierkegaard asks us to imagine that we caught sight of “the pale, grim harvester” and approached him with the question: “Explain yourself, just one word”. What, Kierkegaard asks, would be death’s reply? The answer is simple: there would be no reply. Indeed, it is likely that “he would not even notice that you put your hand on

his shoulder and spoke to him” (SKS 5, 464 / TDIO, 96). And if the person who longed for death wished to thank death for coming at last, would death appreciate that person’s gratitude? Kierkegaard thinks not: “I think that death would not hear a word of what he said, because it explains nothing” (SKS 5, 464 / TDIO, 96). Death is thus inexplicable for it is unable and unwilling to explain itself. The person who seeks to explain death merely reveals that s/he has understood neither death nor him/herself.

In summary, for Kierkegaard in “At a Graveside” death is an uncertain certainty. Death is a certainty because death will eventually come to us all. Death is an uncertainty because we do not know *when* it will come. As an uncertain certainty death is indefinable and inexplicable, and yet it is utterly decisive, for when it decides to come it brings everything to an absolute standstill. This presents human beings with a fundamental challenge. How do we live our lives in the face of the decisive yet indefinable, inexplicable, uncertain certainty that is death? Kierkegaard considers the strategies available under the guiding principle of *earnestness*.

“Earnestness”, however, is not yet another attempt to define death, for death itself, Kierkegaard emphasizes, is not earnest. There is no earnestness in death, because “death is not something actual, and as soon as one is dead it is too late to become earnest” (SKS 5, 445 / TDIO, 74). Nevertheless, “Death itself certainly has its own earnestness”, but this “earnestness lies not in the event, not in the external situation that now another person has died” (SKS 5, 444 / TDIO, 73). Earnestness is rather a relation between the individual and death. *Earnestness consists in applying the thought of death to oneself* (SKS 5, 445, 456 / TDIO, 75).

What, then, is earnestness in relation to death, and how does it enable the individual to come to terms with death’s uncertain certainty? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to distinguish between earnest and what we might call “unearnest” views of death. Human beings are cunning and will go to considerable lengths to avoid facing up to the thought of death. Part of Kierkegaard’s purpose in “At a Graveside” is to expose the crafty and

cowardly stratagems human beings employ to avoid facing up to the stark reality of death.

Inauthentic strategies for dealing with death

1. False conceptions of earnestness

Precisely because earnestness is a *relation* between the human being and death, there arises the possibility of creating the *illusion* of earnestness. The human being can delude him/ herself into thinking s/ he is earnest by misconceiving the nature of earnestness. For example, a person may consider him/ herself “earnest” because s/ he has suffered many trials and tribulations in life. For Kierkegaard, however, earnestness does not mean dwelling on life’s miseries. Earnestness does not mean, as Kierkegaard puts it, going through life “bowed low in adversity, sufferings, sickness, lack of appreciation, hardship, and wretched prospects” (SKS 5, 445 / TDIO, 74). Nor does earnestness consist in undertaking a task that appears to be great or serious in the eyes of one’s contemporaries, such as commanding an army, writing books, holding high office, bringing up a large family, or even dressing corpses. These tasks are not in themselves indications of earnestness, for “earnestness is the *earnestness of the inner being*, not of the job” (SKS 5, 445 / TDIO, 74, emphasis added). The earnestness of people engaged in such “earnest” activities as commanding armies, writings books, holding high office, and so on, may merely be self-importance. Such examples of earnestness are also “direct”. They equate earnestness with a particular activity rather than with a state of the individual’s inner being. Death is in any case left cold by such human conceptions of earnestness and is unimpressed by any notions the human being may have about the importance of his/her life for others or for him/herself (SKS 5, 449 / TDIO, 79). Earnestness, then, does not mean engaging in activities human beings regard as serious and important. Such conceptions of earnestness merely distract from the truly earnest task of *thinking and existing in the thought of death*.

2. *The objective relation to death*

Another strategy human beings employ to avoid thinking the thought of death in earnestness is to adopt an *objective* attitude towards death. That is, human beings may relate to death as *observers*. To contemplate death as an observer is to stand outside death and treat it as an event which happens to other people, but not to oneself. The objective observer of death is the individual who “forgets to think about and take into account his death” (SKS 5, 444 / TDIO, 73). Far from being earnest, this approach reduces death to a jest, for the thought of death is “only a jest if [the observer] merely contemplates death and not himself in death, if he thinks of it as the human condition but not as his own” (SKS 5, 444 / TDIO, 73). As an example of such a jest, Kierkegaard quotes Epicurus’ dictum that “one should not fear death, because ‘when it is, I am not, and when I am, it is not’” (SKS 5, 444 / TDIO, 73). This maxim is a jest because Epicurus has not thought *himself* in relation to death. He holds the thought of death and his own existence apart, so that the two are unable to encounter each other. For Kierkegaard, this is an indication that Epicurus has not genuinely engaged with death as a possibility for *himself*.

Kierkegaard even holds that being moved in witnessing the death of another human being is not earnestness, because it still constitutes an external relation to death. To feel a “light touch of sadness when the passer-by is a father who carries his child for the last time, carries it to the grave” (SKS 5, 446 / TDIO, 75), is not earnestness but merely *mood*. Both jest and mood thus lack earnestness because they *externalize* death and place the thought of death outside of the individual who is thinking it. The true earnestness of death, however, consists not in thinking about death in relation to other people, but in relation to oneself: “To think of oneself as dead is earnestness; to be a witness to the death of another is mood” (SKS 5, 445 / TDIO, 75).

Kierkegaard’s concern to avoid relating to death merely as a mood may account for why the focus in “At a Graveside” shifts rapidly from the deceased to the reader/ listener of the discourse. To dwell on the deceased would be to put death at a distance by focusing on death as something that

happens to other people, in this case to the dead man who is the subject of the priest's funeral speech mentioned at the beginning of the discourse. Climacus' deliberations on death in the *Postscript* may shed light on Kierkegaard's thinking here. Climacus informs his readers that he "know[s] the stock themes dealt with at funerals" (*SKS* 7, 153 / *CUP* 1, 166) and could "deliver funeral orations as well as any ordinary clergyman" (*SKS* 7, 154 / *CUP* 1, 166). Such orations, however, lend themselves to treating death as an abstraction. Climacus, however, aims to free us from thinking of death in merely general terms and from the tendency in contemporary philosophy to subordinate the death of individuals to the world-historical (*SKS* 7, 155, 156 / *CUP* 1, 167, 169). Unfortunately, although he has searched high and low in books for an existential treatment of death that would correct these failings, his efforts have met with no success (*SKS* 7, 158 / *CUP* 1, 170). Although published a year before the *Postscript*, "At a Graveside" can be regarded as endeavouring to remedy this lamentable state of affairs. The discourse can arguably be read as an attempt to subvert traditional funeral orations by taking not the deceased but the *living* as its focus. What would a graveside address look like that applied the thought of death not to the deceased but individually to the mourners standing beside the deceased's grave? The thought of death would then cease to be something to which the individual relates to merely as a mood and would acquire an immediacy and intensity that would confront the living individual with the fundamental existential question of how s/ he should live his life in the face of death's uncertain certainty.

Kierkegaard's critique of *mood* as an "objective" and therefore inauthentic way of relating to death, however, has been criticized by Theunissen and Marino. Theunissen notes that Kierkegaard's negative assessment of mood in "At a Graveside" "ignores those moods in which resoluteness comes to expression, which Kierkegaard had analyzed a year earlier in dealing with anxiety" (Theunissen, 2006, p. 333). Theunissen further complains that it is not easy to see "[h]ow the discourse is able to utter such a sweeping verdict" (Theunissen, 2006, p. 334). Marino, on the

other hand, holds that “Kierkegaard seems dead to [the loneliness] of departing” (Marino, 2011, p. 151), and offers the counterargument that “maybe moods, the grief and terror, can also be revelatory – can also be teachers” (Marino, 2011, p. 152). Marino adds the further criticism that the individual should be prompted by the thought of death to turn to his/ her neighbour. For Marino, earnestness is not the only lesson death teaches. The thought of death also teaches *humanization*, *i.e.*, it motivates us to improve human relations and to be better neighbours (Marino, 2011, p. 156). For Marino, a failing of “At a Graveside” is that there is “scarcely a word about the relationship between our death awareness and the ties that bind us.” There is no hint of the insight that “developing earnestness might make us more open and responsive to others.” The discourse ignores death’s ability to provide “a boost to our ability to love others – to be open to their suffering”. On these grounds Marino concludes that “At a Graveside” “seems inhuman” (Marino, 2011, p. 158) and compares the discourse unfavourably with Tolstoy’s *Death of Ivan Ilych*.

Theunissen and Marino have in my opinion identified a genuine problem with Kierkegaard’s treatment of death in “At a Graveside”. Part of the difficulty arises from Kierkegaard’s inconsistency in his use of the term “mood”. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Vigilius Haufniensis employs “mood” to denote a means of measuring whether one is relating oneself properly to the object to which one is relating oneself. “Mood” reveals whether the individual’s relation to sin is correct or misaligned in some way. Furthermore, Vigilius posits a link between mood and earnestness, claiming that “the mood that corresponds to sin is earnestness” (SKS 4, 322 / CA, 15). In contrast to “At a Graveside”, then, where earnestness and mood are in opposition, in *Concept of Anxiety* earnestness is itself a mood.

A further problem with Kierkegaard’s treatment of the relationship between death and mood is that our status as observers will vary according to our relationship with the person whose death we are witnessing. It may be true that we view the deaths of others with merely a fleeting sadness, but surely the experience of the death of a loved one can have a profound

existential impact on us that is more than just a mood? Furthermore, even the deaths of strangers that leave us personally unmoved are important for our own relationship and attitude to death, for through them we come to know that we too will eventually die. How can we come to know that we are mortal if not through the death of others? The way other people have come to terms with their mortality as well as the manner of their deaths provides us with models for our own attitude to death.

It is on this point that Heidegger perhaps presents us with a fuller exposition of death than Kierkegaard. Whereas Kierkegaard questions the existential significance for me of the death of others, Heidegger points out that it is precisely because I do not experience my own death (for death is the end of experience) that the death of others can make a profound impression on me (Heidegger, 1962, p. 281). The death of others can be educative, for it has the power to prompt each of us to reflect on our own impending death. The death of others can become a catalyst for the “observer’s” coming to sustain a more intense relationship to the thought of death, which may in turn lead to the earnestness demanded by Kierkegaard.

In short, there are different degrees of engagement with the externality of a fellow human being’s death that Kierkegaard fails to note. There is a sliding scale of involvement in the death of others, ranging from the individual’s profound involvement in the death of a loved one to his/ her fleeting sadness or even indifference at the death of a stranger.

This critique can perhaps be blunted by recalling that, despite his assessment of grief as merely a “mood”, Kierkegaard’s reflections on death are in fact prompted by the death of another, namely the death of an elderly merchant (*SKS* 5, 443 / *TDIO*, pp. 71-2). The occasion for “At a Graveside” is, after all, attendance at a funeral. Kierkegaard’s reflections on death, which he presumably does not classify as moods, are occasioned by his being *ved en Grav*, alongside or next to a grave. This would seem to indicate that the death of another need not be merely a mood but can also be the occasion for reflecting on one’s mortality and one’s God-relationship. There thus appears to be a contradiction in Kierkegaard’s treatment of mood in “At a Graveside”.

Sorrow at the death of others is merely a mood, yet it is his presence at the funeral of another that prompts Kierkegaard's reflections on how each of us is faced by the task of living meaningful and worthwhile lives in the face of death.

The solution to this contradiction is to posit two distinct notions of mood in "At a Graveside", which Kierkegaard fails to differentiate, namely what we might call "authentic" and "inauthentic" moods.

Inauthentic moods

Inauthentic moods are when grief, sorrow, and loss become strategies for allowing the individual to push aside the thought of death in order to conceive of death as something that happens not to him/ herself but to others. This inauthentic mood can even occur when the individual appears to be applying the thought of death to him/ herself, such as when instead of acting on the thought of death the individual takes refuge in "romantic dreaming" and allows him/ herself to be anaesthetized "into the sleep of depression" and lose him/ herself "in absentminded preoccupation with the symbols of death" (SKS 5, 454 / TDIO, 84).

What Kierkegaard is concerned to prevent is mood dragging the individual into the aesthetic sphere rather than facilitating the movement towards the ethical. That this is his concern would seem to be indicated by a passage in the draft of "At a Graveside" where he states that, "There is in talk about death a misunderstood leap from the ethical into the aesthetic... when we say not our death but the death of friends is the most difficult of all things. For the only earnestness is that *I* die and must stand judgement" (Pap. VI B 120, 1; cf. Pap. XI A 233). The earnestness of death for Kierkegaard does not lie in conceiving of death as an external event. It is the reflection of the thought of death in the *inner being* of the individual that constitutes earnestness (SKS 5, 444 / TDIO, 73).

Authentic moods

Authentic moods are those moods that prompt the individual to reflect on his/ her own death and how to live earnestly in the face of death. If one is prompted by the death of a loved one or by attending a funeral to reflect on how one personally should address the fact of one's mortality, then the moods of grief, sorrow, and loss become "authentic" moods. The reflections on death that Kierkegaard offers the reader in "At a Graveside" arguably fall into this category.

That a notion of "authentic" mood is implied in "At a Graveside" may be also indicated by Kierkegaard's brief acknowledgement of the existence of "an earnestness in mood" (*SKS* 5, 446 / *TDIO*, 75). As an example of such earnestness, Kierkegaard cites the case of "when death intrudes into the vain pursuits and snatches the foolish girl dressed in her most vainglorious finery, snatches the fool in his most vainglorious moment" (*SKS* 5, 446 / *TDIO*, 75). Here earnestness seems to be present in the contrast between human beings' narcissistic activities and the sudden entry of death that exposes the frivolity of these activities and the people who engage in them.

Another possible instance of authentic mood is Kierkegaard's apparent concession that earnestness can indeed be prompted by the death of another person. This is implied in his description of "the jolting breakthrough of earnestness when it was your one and only guide [who died] and loneliness overwhelms you" (*SKS* 5, 446 / *TDIO*, 75). Although Kierkegaard insists that "this is still a mood" (*SKS* 5, 446 / *TDIO*, 75), it is nevertheless a mood that is connected with earnestness. Kierkegaard thus seems at certain points in the discourse to acknowledge a mood that is on the threshold of earnestness, namely, a mood that confronts the individual with the uncertain certainty of death in a way that prompts the individual to apply the thought of death to him/ herself. Mood, then, can become a vehicle of earnestness when events occur that confront the onlooker with the radical uncertainty of death and its annihilation of human vanity. The mood of grief on witnessing the death of another would become earnestness, however, only if the observer applied to him/ herself the thought of death arising from witnessing the death of another

person. That is, if a mood prompts us to reflect on our own personal mortality, then it is more than merely a mood and becomes the basis for earnestness in relation to death.

This line of thought may go some way to meeting Marino's criticism of Kierkegaard's failure to consider the link between the thought of death and humanization. In so far as the individual exploits his concern with his/her neighbour to avoid the thought of death, for example, by filling his/her time with doing good works so that s/he never has time for self-reflection, turning to one's neighbour becomes yet another strategy for absolving oneself of the responsibility of thinking of oneself and death together. A further defence of Kierkegaard against Marino's critique is that there is a partial remedy of the deficiency Marino identifies in "At a Graveside" in chapter IX of *Works of Love*, the theme of which is "The Work of Love in Recollecting One who is Dead" (SKS 9, 339-52 / WL, 345-58). Marino's wished-for humanization of the thought of death is implied in the duties Kierkegaard states the living owe to the dead (SKS 9, 341 / WL, 347) and in his description of the recollection of the dead as "a work of the most unselfish love" (SKS 9, 343 / WL, 349). The failure of Kierkegaard to explore in "At a Graveside" how the thought of death should stimulate love of neighbour, then, is perhaps not as severe a flaw as Marino considers it to be.

Nevertheless, it remains true that the social consequences of the individual's application of the thought of death to him/herself need to be more fully thought through than Kierkegaard has done in "At a Graveside". There is little in the discourse on the *practical* consequences that follow from one's application of the thought of death to oneself.

3. *Postponement*

Human beings can strive to avoid confronting the certainty of death by means of what Kierkegaard terms "postponement" (SKS 5, 450 / TDIO, 79). We can attempt to obtain consolation in life by "postponing" death, that is, by regarding death as something that belongs to the future but not to the present. We do not call this postponement by its name, of course, for to do

so would be to acknowledge the postponement as postponement. This refusal to call postponement by its real name is itself a further postponement. This is not a genuine postponement, however, for impassive, immutable, inevitable death cannot be put off. Postponement is thus a “false flatterer” and “a hypocritical deceiver” (*SKS* 5, 450 / *TDIO*, 79). It is merely self-deceit when we push away the thought of death by persuading ourselves and others that death always lies in the future, never in the present. An example of the strategy of postponement is the dying individual who refuses to face up to the thought of death even on his/ her deathbed. “Even in the moment of death”, Kierkegaard comments, “the dying person thinks that he still might have some time to live” (*SKS* 5, 449 / *TDIO*, 79). Those sitting at the dying person’s bedside also practise postponement by being “afraid to tell him that all is over” (*SKS* 5, 449-50 / *TDIO*, 79). Postponement is a failure to face up to the uncertain certainty of death.

4. Death as sleep

Another strategy human beings employ to evade the thought of death is to weaken the decisiveness of death’s decision by conceiving of death as sleep. Death is idealized as a peaceful state in which the weary human being at last finds rest (*SKS* 5, 450-1 / *TDIO*, 80-1). This approach to death, however, is not earnest and is guilty of reducing the thought of death to a mood, in this case a mood of longing for peace and rest. Longing for the sleep of death is not an earnest engagement with the thought of death, however, but is merely “depression’s escape from life” (*SKS* 5, 451 / *TDIO*, 81). It does not take the thought of death seriously, for once one takes death seriously one knows that death does not offer the sort of escape longed for by the world-weary human being, because with death, as we have seen, “all is over” (*SKS* 5, 442, 444, 449 / *TDIO*, 71, 73, 79). This means for Kierkegaard that longing for the sleep of death is “rebellion” and “fraudulence” (*SKS* 5, 451 / *TDIO*, 81). It is rebellion because the individual wishes to sleep rather than to seize the task life assigns to the individual of living life and enduring the suffering of life. It is fraudulence because the

soporific individual is “unwilling to understand that there is something else to fear than life, and therefore a consoling wisdom other than the sleep of death must be found” (*SKS* 5, 451 / *TDIO*, 81). That is, to conceive of death as peaceful rest is fraudulent because it is deceitful about the true nature of death and does not face death with the fear that death deserves. The individual who longs for death fraudulently conceives of him/ herself as in some sense continuing during the sleep of death, of continuing to be present in death, despite his/ her annihilation by death. We imagine ourselves as dead, but precisely in imagining our death we show that death is not present, and that we have therefore not grasped the thought of death. So long as we imagine our death as some form of continuation, we are not taking death seriously. We have, in Kierkegaard’s language, failed to grasp the earnestness of the thought of death.

5. Death as consolation

A similar strategy to that of seeing death as a refreshing sleep is to conceive of death as a consolation. This, too, however, is another example of self-deception. Kierkegaard points to two factors which indicate that, despite all our claims to the contrary, we do not in reality see death as a consolation. That we are deluding ourselves is betrayed, firstly, by our own spontaneous reaction when someone passes out and looks more dead than alive. What, Kierkegaard asks, do you do when confronted by such an event? “You call to the person who has fainted because this condition makes you shudder – that is, when the condition of death is that of a living person” (*SKS* 5, 451 / *TDIO*, 81). You do not, however, call out to a genuinely dead person, because you know this is of no use. “[I]s it comforting, then,” Kierkegaard asks, “that the reason you do not call to the dead person is that it cannot help!” (*SKS* 5, 451 / *TDIO*, 81-2). What Kierkegaard seems to mean by this comment is that in being suddenly confronted in the midst of life by what seems like death, it is not comforting but terrifying. The consoling conception of death as relief from life’s trials and tribulations is thus exposed as a delusion. It is precisely because deep down you recognize the terror of death that you call to the

person who has fainted and try to recall him to the land of the living. There is a lesson here for the person who longs for the consolation of death. If you are overwhelmed with a depression that prompts you to long for death, call out to yourself as you would to the person who has fainted and “do not seek deceptive comfort in wishing all was over!” (SKS 5, 452 / TDIO, 82).

A second indication that finding consolation in death is a delusion is that it is not death itself but only the *thought* of death which is consoling. Once death is there, then the thought of death, like the mind that entertains this thought, is snuffed out. With the extinction of the person holding fast to the thought of death, the consoling power of this thought is also extinguished. The consoling thought of death is thus no longer present in the dead person to console him. This means, Kierkegaard points out, that the dead person can have no comfort in his life being over (SKS 5, 452 / TDIO, 82).

6. *Hedonistic strategies*

Although Kierkegaard does not employ the term in “At a Graveside,” one of the approaches to death he seems to be criticizing in the discourse is *hedonism*, namely, seeking to escape the thought of death by distracting oneself with pleasure. There appear to be three types of the hedonistic approach to death that Kierkegaard has in mind in this discourse.

A common strategy for dealing with the threat posed by the thought of death is to seek refuge in self-indulgence and self-gratification. In Kierkegaard’s words, “Death induces the sensual person to say: Let us eat and drink, because tomorrow we shall die” (SKS 5, 453 / TDIO, 83). For Kierkegaard, this strategy “is sensuality’s cowardly lust for life, that contemptible order of things where one lives in order to eat and drink instead of eating and drinking in order to live” (SKS 5, 453 / TDIO, 83). Kierkegaard, however, devotes little space to analysing this type of evasion of the thought of death, nor does he explain why this strategy is cowardly and contemptible.

There is another, higher form of hedonistic response to death we might term *apathetic resignation* in the face of death. Kierkegaard only very briefly touches on this strategy but seems to regard it as a more advanced

form of the strategy of forgetting death by distracting oneself with the pleasures of eating and drinking. He writes: “The idea of death may induce weakness in the more profound person so that he sinks relaxed in mood” (*SKS* 5, 453 / *TDIO*, 83).

A third strategy is to attempt to deal with death’s inexplicability by opting for one of the two possible ways in which death can be conceived, namely, as “the supreme good fortune” or as “the greatest misfortune” that can befall human beings (*SKS* 5, 466 / *TDIO*, 98). Both these possible responses to the inexplicability of death are in Kierkegaard’s opinion mistaken. To view death as the supreme good fortune, Kierkegaard holds, “betrays a life of childishness” (*SKS* 5, 466 / *TDIO*, 98). Such an understanding of death reveals that the individual has lived a life determined by “a child’s and adolescent’s conception of the pleasant and the unpleasant” (*SKS* 5, 466 / *TDIO*, 98). Guided by what Johannes Climacus would later call “the esthetic dialectic of fortune and misfortune” (*SKS* 7, 403 / *CUP* 1, 444), such an individual sees life merely in terms of the alternation of good and bad experiences. As s/ he grows older and experiences increasing misfortune, s/ he finds that life is not all that s/ he had hoped for. In the draft of “At a Graveside” Kierkegaard cites the example of someone who lived long in youthful confidence in life, but when he was deceived and deceived again by someone in whom he had believed, “then the childishness within him concentrated upon death” (*Pap.* VI B 124:1 / *TDIO*, 150). Disappointed with life, the childish individual looks forward to death as the supreme good fortune which will remove him/ her from this vale of tears and give him/ her what s/ he lacked in life. As Kierkegaard puts it, “Death now became the friend sought for, the beloved, the rich benefactor who had everything to give that his childishness had futilely sought to have fulfilled in life” (*SKS* 5, 466 / *TDIO*, 98). Such an explanation of death is not earnestness, however, but “merely betrays the state of the explainer’s own inner being, betrays that he did not perceive the retroactive effect of earnestness but is childishly hurrying ahead, childishly pinning his hopes on death as he did in life” (*SKS* 5, 466 / *TDIO*, 98). The thought of death does not change the individual’s

self-understanding, nor does it transform his/ her life. Death is merely conceived of as an escape route from the troubled self's suffering in life.

The other possible explanation the individual may advance to address the problem of death's inexplicability focuses on the second element of the dialectic of fortune and misfortune. Here the attitude of the individual is to hold that, "[a]s the inexplicable, death may seem to be the greatest misfortune" (SKS 5, 466 / TDIO, 98). This, too, is condemned by Kierkegaard. Such an explanation, he writes, "indicates that the explainer is cowardly clinging to life, perhaps cowardly to its favour, perhaps cowardly to its suffering, so that he fears life but fears death even more" (SKS 5, 466 / TDIO, 98). Whether one considers death as fortunate or misfortunate, then, both strategies constitute a cowardly evasion of the decisiveness of death and the task with which it confronts the single individual.

7. Death the Leveller

A person may take comfort in death being the great leveller. No matter how high and mighty someone may be in life, in death s/ he will be no better than the lowliest beggar. To the person who feels a failure in life, death's lack of discrimination between the successful and unsuccessful, the high and the lowly, is a source of comfort. In the end the great man or the successful woman will be no better than I am. Like me, they will lie silent in the grave and – what a delicious thought! – perhaps in a grave alongside mine! Kierkegaard attacks those who would seek solace in death's levelling of human status on three counts.

Firstly, seeking consolation in the equality of death is merely another cowardly subterfuge to avoid facing up to the challenges and tasks of life. The desire for earthly dissimilarity to be dissolved by death is the attempt by "a cowardly craving of depression" (SKS 5, 456 / TDIO, 87) to avoid facing up to life as a task – a task which may consist in enduring the inequality which life has inflicted upon a human being. Longing for death's annihilation of difference is thus a refusal to accept one's task. Indeed, to seek solace in death's removal of earthly dissimilarities and inequalities is "rebellion

against God” and “enmity against myself” (*SKS* 5, 459 / *TDIO*, 90). It is rebellion against God because one has shirked the task of enduring the misfortunes of life. It is enmity against oneself because instead of seizing the task which will lead to the equality before God that constitutes fulness of life and is the human being’s joy, the individual yearns to end his/ her life.

A second problem with finding comfort in death is that it is dependent upon the delusion that the individual continues to be alive throughout his/ her death. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of death and is another example of the error of defining death from the perspective of life. The attraction of death is its elimination of the inequalities under which the individual has suffered during life. The satisfaction of seeing these inequalities eliminated, however, can be enjoyed only if the individual lives on to experience the cancellation of inequality. Kierkegaard asks, “If it actually were anyone’s idea to want to be consoled in this way by the equality of death – would it not be the contradiction of continuing to live that would give the presumptuous daring deed its allure?” (*SKS* 5, 457 / *TDIO*, 88). The person who yearns for death has forgotten a crucial fact, namely, that once dead each of us completely forgets the dissimilarity and inequality that so troubled us in life. All inequalities and the pain they caused us in life are swallowed up in the eternal silence of the grave. Where, then, is the consolation for life’s equalities if this consolation can never be experienced? Seeking solace in death’s annihilation of difference is thus a delusion. Worse, it is “the lie and the deception in the presumptuous defiance that wants to conspire with death against life. It is forgotten that death is the strongest; it is forgotten that it has no preferences, that it does not make a pact with anyone, so that in death he acquires a free pass and latitude for the enjoyment of being annihilated” (*SKS* 5, 457 / *TDIO*, 88).

Thirdly, even in death and the equality it imposes upon great and small, winners and losers, there still remains a crucial difference between human beings, indeed, “a difference that cries loud to heaven – the difference of what that life was that now in death is over” (*SKS* 5, 454 / *TDIO*, 85). Kierkegaard’s point here seems to be that death does not mean that the

significance of my life is annulled, for the decisions I made during my life were decisive for my life while I was living it. My death does not change the life I lived and does not reduce to insignificance how I lived that life. Kierkegaard seems to be denying that death has the final word concerning life's significance. My life has significance in my *living* it and that is not changed by the fact that my life is now over. To seek consolation in the equality of death humanly conceived as the elimination of the differences and inequalities that trouble human beings in life is merely another example of "mood". In a passage deleted from the sketch for "At a Graveside", Kierkegaard comments: "That death makes us all equal may be comforting for hate, which seeks this powerless revenge, for the enthusiasm of despair", but this attitude to death remains merely "mood" (*Pap.* VI B 120:12 / *TDIO*, 148). Yearning for death to extinguish the differences of life fails to take death seriously as death.

8. *Death as an enigma*

The earnestness of death can be avoided by treating death as an *enigma*. This is achieved by allowing death's indefinability and inexplicability to become the basis for a guessing game in which the individual avoids engaging existentially with the thought of death. Kierkegaard identifies three ways in which the individual can exploit the enigmatic character of death to avoid thinking the thought of death in earnestness.

Firstly, the individual can *speculate* about death. S/ he can run through all death's possibilities and try out a diverse array of moods and attitudes towards death, such as surprise, sadness, mockery etc. Such an individual, however, is merely playing with the notion of death, "until the thought of one's own death evaporates in a fog before the eyes and the reminder of one's own death becomes an indefinite buzzing in the ears" (*SKS* 5, 461 / *TDIO*, 92). The individual no longer takes his/ her own death seriously, for death merely "becomes a droll instance in all these manifold unpredictable instances" (*SKS* 5, 461 / *TDIO*, 92).

A second way of avoiding the reality of death is to appeal to death's enigma as a reason for not thinking about death at all. The indeterminability or "indecisiveness" of death, *i.e.*, the fact that we simply cannot determine or decide what death is, can be employed to keep death at arm's length (SKS 5, 465 / TDIO, 97-8). Since I cannot explain death and cannot decide whether it is a good or an evil, why should I waste my time thinking about it? I should live in and for the present, and put aside the question of death, which is, after all, simply unanswerable. There is enough in life to keep me occupied without my troubling myself with insoluble problems. In short, if death is inexplicable, then I am under no compulsion to make a decision concerning death. I can content myself with remaining agnostic and indecisive, and enjoy life while it lasts. Such an attitude is for Kierkegaard another example of the failure to think the thought of death in earnestness.⁶

A third approach to the enigma of death is to mitigate death's inexplicability by *labelling* death. Death, Kierkegaard points out, has been called many things: "a transition, a transformation, a suffering, a struggle, the last struggle, a punishment, the wages of sin" (SKS 5, 466 / TDIO, 99). This attempt to find a description of death can be an attempt to evade the challenge posed by death for two reasons. Firstly, does the individual "live" in these theories? These various descriptions of death are not necessarily false. The issue is whether the adherent of such views holds them not merely notionally but *existentially*. It is easy to let these theories trip off the tongue, but difficult to allow them to make a difference to one's life. Kierkegaard complains that, "No one... troubles the opinion-holder with a consideration

⁶ Kierkegaard, however, acknowledges the existence in paganism of an appropriate form of indecisiveness in the face of death. "To paganism", Kierkegaard claims, "the highest courage was the wise person (whose earnestness was indicated expressly by his not being in a hurry with the explanation) who was able to live with the thought of death in such a way that he overcame this thought every moment of his life by indecisiveness" (SKS 5, 465 / TDIO, 98). Kierkegaard does not mention anyone by name, but it seems likely that he is thinking here of Socrates. The last lines of Plato's *Apology* record how Socrates, on being condemned to death, commented, 'Well, now it is time to be off, I to die and you to live; but which of us has the happier prospect is unknown to anyone but God' (Plato, *The Apology*, 42a). Socrates' indecisiveness, however, does not express itself as avoidance of the thought of death but consists of living in the tension of death's inexplicability.

of the other side of the truth, whether one actually does have the opinion, whether it is just something one is reciting” (SKS 5, 467 / TDIO, 99). Secondly, the construction of theories of death can all too easily become an *intellectualization* of the problem of death. Death is then reduced to an intellectual puzzle which ingenious people strive to solve with new and ever grander theories. Alas, Kierkegaard laments, all this ingenuity is “merely diversion and absentmindedness in intellectual abstraction” (SKS 5, 468 / TDIO, 100). As we shall see, the enigma of death cannot be solved by the intellect, but only by existentially appropriating the thought of death and allowing it to transform one’s life.

The authentic relation to death: earnestness

The strategies outlined above are inappropriate ways of coming to terms with death. In Kierkegaard’s terms, they are not “earnest”. Some are negative towards life and seek to escape the toils of life by seeking solace in death. Others seek to ignore the thought of death altogether, while others seek to explain death. True earnestness towards death, however, is not hostile towards life, nor does it ignore death, nor does it seek to explain death. On the contrary, earnestness is positive towards life precisely because it understands what the proper relationship to death is: “Earnestness does not scowl but is reconciled with life and knows how to fear death” (SKS 5, 457 / TDIO, 88). What, then, is the proper relationship of the human being to death? How can the individual think the thought of death in earnestness?

True earnestness towards death must not be confused with the inadequate forms of earnestness discussed earlier, which confused seriousness in life with earnestness towards death. Earnestness does not consist in undertaking grand projects and making dramatic gestures. Nor does earnestness consist in thinking about the death of others. No matter how painful and moving the death of another person may be, thinking about the death of that person is not earnestness (SKS 5, 445-6 / TDIO, 75). Nor is Epicurus’ view of life and death as mutually exclusive opposites an instance

of earnestness. Rather, earnestness consists in thinking death and life together within the existence of the individual human being. As Kierkegaard puts it, “Earnestness is that you think death, and that you are thinking it as your lot, and that you are then doing what death is indeed unable to do – namely, that you are and death also is” (*SKS* 5, 446 / *TDIO*, 75). That is, earnestness consists in the individual bringing the thought of death together with life within his/ her own “inner being”. Death is drawn into the life of the earnest individual as an ever-present possibility.

A term Kierkegaard employs in “At a Graveside” to describe the individual’s integration into his/ her life of the thought of death is *retroactivity*. Kierkegaard describes the discourse as being “about the acquiring of retroactive power in life through the explanation” of death (*SKS* 5, 466 / *TDIO*, 99). This explanation, however, focuses not on death, which is inexplicable, but on the human being: “Death has no need of an explanation and certainly has never requested any thinker to be of assistance. But the living needs the explanation – and why? In order to live accordingly” (*SKS* 5, 466 / *TDIO*, 99).

The inexplicability of death means that death constitutes the *boundary* for human beings. It is precisely death’s status as boundary that gives the thought of death its “retroactive power” (*SKS* 5, 465, 468 / *TDIO*, 97, 100) on the existence of the human being. Kierkegaard states: “The inexplicability is the boundary, and the importance of the statement is simply to give the thought of death retroactive power and make it impelling in life, because with the decision of death all is over, and because the uncertainty of death inspects every moment” (*SKS* 5, 468 / *TDIO*, 100). As this passage makes clear, it is because death is a boundary that the thought of death becomes “impelling in life”. Death teaches the human being to look to him/ herself. It is this “retroactivity” that constitutes the basis of earnestness. The key thing is the impact the thought of death has on the existence of the individual. Anything that hinders self-reflection is an inauthentic response to the thought of death.

A further feature of earnestness in relation to death is that it focuses the individual's attention on him/ herself. The real object of earnestness is oneself and how one should live one's life in the face of death. In his draft to "At a Graveside" Kierkegaard sums up "[t]he substance of the work" as being the claim that "[t]he expression of earnestness [is] to live every day as if it were the last, and the first in a long life" (*Pap.* VI B 120:11 212 / *TDIO*, 148). The thought of death is a means of becoming aware of this. This point is made particularly clearly in passages from Kierkegaard's sketch for "At a Graveside", where he states that the earnestness provoked by the indefinability of death is "the earnestness that it is oneself" (*Pap.* VI B 120:11 211 *TDIO*, 147) with whom one must be concerned and that "[t]he earnestness consists precisely in this, that the observer himself must explain it to himself" (*Pap.* VI B 120:13 / *TDIO*, 149).

Earnestness in relation to death, then, consists in the individual making death the controlling factor in his/ her life, not in self-indulgent morbidity, but as the dark force against which life must be lived. Properly and earnestly understood, death is the force which determines the manner in which the individual will live his/ her life. Death is important precisely because of its significance for *life*: "to be wide awake and think death..., to think that all was over, that everything was lost along with life, in order then to win everything in life – this is earnestness" (*SKS* 5, 447 / *TDIO*, 76). Earnestness is the transformation of *my* self in the light of the stark reality of *my* condemnation to death.

Kierkegaard explores the relationship of the earnest individual to death from three perspectives, each of which we shall now consider in turn.

1. *Death the Teacher*

"Death", Kierkegaard writes, "is the schoolmaster of earnestness" (*SKS* 5, 446 / *TDIO*, 75). Death's teaching, however, has no content. There is no body of knowledge that death imparts to the human being, no information or doctrine of which the human being can make use. What death teaches human beings is to become attentive to themselves: "Death in earnest

gives life force as nothing else does; it makes one alert as nothing else does” (SKS 5, 453 / TDIO, 83). Death teaches us by throwing a spotlight, as it were, on our lives, compelling us to consider what sort of life death will one day extinguish. In Kierkegaard’s words, “The earnest person looks at himself; so he knows the nature of the one who would become death’s booty here if it were to come today; he looks at his own work and so he knows what work it is that would be interrupted here if death were to come today” (SKS 5, 462 / TDIO, 94). This ability of death to make human beings alert stems from death’s inexplicability. As Kierkegaard puts it, death’s inexplicability “is death’s earnest warning to the living: I need no explanation; but bear in mind, you yourself, that with this decision all is over and that this decision can at any moment be at hand; see, it is very advisable for you to bear this in mind” (SKS 5, 468 / TDIO, 100-01).

Death also teaches the earnest individual how to use *time*. Death makes us aware that “time also is a good” (SKS 5, 453 / TDIO, 83) by revealing to us time’s scarcity (SKS 5, 453 / TDIO, 84). In the world of commerce, Kierkegaard observes, the value of a commodity is dependent upon the law of supply and demand. If a commodity is in short supply, then its value rises, thereby increasing the profits of the merchant supplying that commodity. The same law applies to the human being’s relationship with time. Death makes us aware of the scarcity of time and thereby draws our attention to time’s value. We do not have an unlimited supply of time at our disposal. Precisely for this reason, time becomes a precious commodity. The task of each human being is to use it well and to use it wisely. The decisiveness of death’s decision places us before our own individual decision concerning how to use the time left to us. The earnest individual allows him/herself to be educated by death concerning the scarcity and *ipso facto* the value of time. The earnest human being is s/ he who “with the thought of death... is able to create a scarcity so that the year and the day receive infinite worth” (SKS 5, 453 / TDIO, 84). This attentiveness to the importance of time stems from death’s dialectic of certainty and uncertainty. If the time of death were certain, we would have a different attitude to time. It might be that of

the lazy student who puts off working on his/ her assignment until the last possible moment. Alternatively, Parkinson's Law may apply, and the human being may allow one task completely to fill his/ her time, so that s/ he never becomes focused on what is important in life. Deadlines are important to spur human beings on; and if the deadline is every single day, then we are spurred on even more, with the result that the present acquires an intensity and a quality which it would not otherwise have. As Kierkegaard puts it, "No teacher is able to teach the pupil to pay attention to what is said the way the uncertainty of death does when it points to the certainty of death; and no teacher is able to keep the pupil's thoughts concentrated on the one object of instruction the way the thought of the uncertainty of death does when it practices the thought of the certainty of death" (*SKS* 5, 463 / *TDIO*, 95).

The dialectic of death's certainty and uncertainty has the power to prompt the individual to *seize the initiative from death*. The earnest individual can cut through death's dialectic of certainty and uncertainty by bringing death into his/ her life and putting death to the service of life. This the individual does by means of what we might term a "proleptic" death. The individual takes death seriously and understands that it could break in at any moment or could be postponed until the distant future. The uncertainty and vacillation this creates in the life of the individual can be overcome if we seize the initiative from death by anticipating death.⁷ As Kierkegaard puts it, "If death says, 'Perhaps this very day,' then earnestness says, 'Let it perhaps be today or not,' but I say, 'This very day'" (*SKS* 5, 454 / *TDIO*, 85). We might paraphrase Kierkegaard's argument as follows: "Today is the day of my death, whether I die or live. Therefore, I must live today as if it were my last, whether I die or live." In thinking in this way, the earnest person has united life and death in his own existence. He has made "friends with the contenders" (*SKS* 5, 454 / *TDIO*, 84). Consequently, death is an "aid" in life's work (*SKS* 5, 454 / *TDIO*, 84), and "in the earnest thought of death [the individual] has the most faithful ally" (*SKS* 5, 454 / *TDIO*, 84-5).

⁷ In this respect, "At a Graveside" can be regarded as Kierkegaard's answer to Climacus' question "whether death can be anticipated and *anticipando* be experienced in an idea, or whether it is only when it actually is" (*SKS* 7, 155 / *CUP* 1, 168).

Death also checks to see if there is a correspondence between what I claim to believe and what I actually am. Death, with its dialectic of certainty and uncertainty, acts as the inspector of each individual human being's existence. It assesses whether the individual genuinely lives according to the opinions s/ he holds about death. Kierkegaard writes: "In all earnestness the uncertainty of death continually takes the liberty of making an inspection to see whether the opinion-holder actually does have this opinion – that is, makes an inspection to see whether his life expresses it.... [T]he uncertainty of death is the pupil's rigorous oral examiner" (*SKS* 5, 467 / *TDIO*, 100).

2. The Equality of Death

On the surface, earnestness seems to have much in common with unearnestness. "Earnestness", Kierkegaard writes, "understands the same thing about death but understands it in a different way. It understands that death makes all equal" (*SKS* 5, 457-8 / *TDIO*, 89). The earnest person has the same object of understanding as the unearnest individual, namely death, and like the unearnest individual the earnest individual understands that death makes all human beings equal. Where the earnest individual differs from the unearnest individual, however, is in his/ her conception of the nature of this equality and the way it should be addressed. Like the unearnest individual, the earnest individual understands the equality of death to be the equality of annihilation. The earnest individual, however, does not find solace in this equality of annihilation, but "shudders before the empty space, before the equality of annihilation, and this shudder that is productive in the life of nature is impelling in the life of spirit" (*SKS* 5, 458 / *TDIO*, 89). Where the earnest individual differs from the unearnest individual, then, is that the former does not welcome death as solace for his failure in life.

Unlike the unearnest individual, the earnest person does not selfishly revel in death's wreaking vengeance on those who have succeeded in life but sees the equality of death as pointing towards the equality of human beings *before God*. The earnest individual places the equality of death in the context of the God-relationship. The "earnest thought of death", Kierkegaard writes,

“has helped the earnest person to subordinate the most advantageous dissimilarity to the humble equality before God and has helped him to raise himself above the most oppressive dissimilarity into the humble equality before God” (*SKS* 5, 458 / *TDIO*, 89-90). Death’s equality affirms and teaches us our equality before God, for the thought of death, Kierkegaard writes, “helped you to surmount the dissimilarity, to find the equality before God and to want to express this equality” (*SKS* 5, 459 / *TDIO*, 90). Educated by the thought of death, the individual is able to overcome dissimilarity by recognizing and acknowledging that before God all human beings are equal.

It is not only the embittered failure in life who allows death’s equality to teach him/ her that all human beings are equal before God, however, but also the person who has enjoyed success and fortune in his/ her life. Both the abject failure and the great success are taught by the earnest thought of the equality of death to know God and to recognize the equality of all human beings before God. Kierkegaard comments, “When your soul went astray in preferential treatment and you could scarcely recognize yourself for all the glory, the earnest thought of the equality of death made you unrecognizable in another way and you learned to know yourself and to want to be known before God” (*SKS* 5, 458-9 / *TDIO*, 90). The thought of death draws the human being’s attention away from earthly dissimilarity, whether this be wretchedness or glory, and focuses it on God. This has an important existential and “ennobling” impact on the individual (*SKS* 5, 445 / *TDIO*, 74). Secure in the knowledge that we are all equal before God, the individual can share in the joy of the successful, fortunate person; he can forget the affronts he has received and acknowledge the excellence of the person who has injured him. Furthermore, in light of the equality of every human being before God, joy is doubled, because I can join in my fellow human being’s joy at his good fortune. And when I do this, then the difference between me and those I had previously resented is diminished, and another form of equality begins to emerge. I can do this because my self-worth is not dependent on comparing myself with other human beings but on the equality all human beings enjoy before God.

3. *Death as a Call to Action*

The preceding considerations lead on to a further important feature of earnestness in the face of death, namely, that the earnest individual understands the thought of death as a *call to action*. Because death is certain and inexplicable, the task is not to seek consolation in death, for there can be no consolation when death is present, for death is annihilation. All the human being can achieve is to understand him/ herself in the light of the certainty of death. But this self-understanding is a call to action. In death all is over and no action is possible. Consequently, the task of the human being is to act here and now as long as s/ he is alive. Kierkegaard writes:

If it is certain that death exists, which it is; if it is certain that with death's decision all is over; if it is certain that death itself never becomes involved in giving any explanation – well, then it is a matter of understanding oneself, and the earnest understanding is that if death is night then life is day, that if no work can be done at night then work can be done during the day; and the terse but impelling cry of earnestness, like death's terse cry is: This very day. (SKS 5, 452-3 / TDIO, 83)

Death, then, tells the earnest individual to *seize life and act*. Thus, in contrast to unearnest notions of death, earnestness does not absorb itself in various consoling, aesthetic, and anaesthetizing conceptions of death, but focuses on *acting* in the face of death. “Earnestness”, Kierkegaard writes, “does not sit sunk in contemplation, does not rewrite expressions, does not think about the ingeniousness of imagery, does not discuss, but *acts*” (SKS 5, 452 / TDIO, 82-3, emphasis added). Death's equality means that each of us is placed before a task – the task of becoming ourselves. Death's call to action means that dissimilarity is dissolved in the similarity of *task*. The task of one person may be to think the thought of death in earnestness in the context of a life of good fortune and success. The task of another person may be to think the thought of death in a life of hardship and suffering. In both cases the earnest thought of death places these two different lives in their proper context, for the earnest thought of death reveals that earthly dissimilarities and inequalities are insignificant. Both success and failure present

opportunities for addressing the task that life has assigned to the individual. Kierkegaard comments, “if the only difference is that one person’s good fortune and honour and wealth and beauty are a field plant and the other’s a grave flower that is cultivated in the sacred soil of self-denial – is the difference then so great; after all, they are both fortunate and honoured and rich and beautiful and powerful” (*SKS* 5, 459 / *TDIO*, 90-1).

Death, earnestness, and the Christian hope in “At a Graveside”

Kierkegaard’s argument in “At a Graveside” is that the enigma of death cannot be resolved intellectually, but only existentially. No theory or explanation of death will ever be able truly to explain death. We cannot *think* death, we can respond to death only by reflecting on ourselves, making use of the time granted to us, and by *action*. Both earnestness and unearnestness acknowledge the indefinability of death, but whereas unearnestness resorts to speculation and dissolves the thought of death into a multiplicity of evasive stratagems, earnestness understands the thought of death to be the basis for self-understanding and action.

The thought of death is thus the springboard for self-transcendence. To reflect on one’s life from the perspective of one’s mortality is to achieve this-worldly transcendence, to rise above absorption in everydayness and to subject oneself to radical self-questioning. Merely to speculate about death, however, as if it were an academic problem, is to put death at a distance from oneself. Turning to speculation on the afterlife and the possibility of immortality is a similarly false strategy. Such an approach to death pushes transcendence into a beyond about which we can know nothing.

What are we to make of the apparent absence of Christian concepts in “At a Graveside”? Does the this-worldly self-transcendence death fosters push out the possibility of other-worldly transcendence? In short, how are we to explain the paucity of references to the Christian hope of an afterlife in this discourse?

We should note that Christianity is not completely absent and that it is implicit at various points in the discourse. We have already observed that the true conception of the equality of death entails understanding oneself as equal *before God*. Furthermore, the discourse contains occasional hints of the Christian conviction that death is not the end, despite Kierkegaard's repeated asseverations that with death "all is over". Thus, the Christian hope of an afterlife is implied in the statement that if the deceased "*were not with God now*, God would miss him in life" (SKS 5, 443 / TDIO, 72, emphasis added). The Christian perspective also appears to be alluded to in the fact that the deceased's death is described as a continuation of the churchgoing he practised while alive: "God's house was to him a second home – and now he has gone home" (TDIO, 72). Although the first line that follows this sentence may at first sight appear to undermine this – "But in the grave there is no recollection" (SKS 5, 443 / TDIO, 72) – this can be accounted for on the grounds that since the deceased has "gone home" to God, there is no need to recollect God because the deceased is now with God. The deceased's widow also seems to hold out hope that, despite the priest's melancholy statement that "all is over", the grave does not mean the end. Despite her grief, she is "a true widow who, forsaken, has her hope in God" (SKS 5, 442 / TDIO, 71). In such passages there appears to be at least a hint of the possibility of an afterlife.

Since, however, these allusions to the afterlife appear in the report of the funeral with which "At a Graveside" opens, it might be argued that they reflect only the sentiments spoken by the priest at the graveside and do not belong to the main thrust of the discourse, which is that death is absolutely the end. Such a view, however, is refuted by Kierkegaard's betrayal of his Christian presuppositions at other places in the discourse. For example, his exhortation to his readers to use wisely the time that remains to them implies a criterion for judging the wisdom of their response to their awareness of "time's scarcity" (SKS 5, 453 / TDIO, 83-4). That Kierkegaard has a criterion of the appropriate response to death lurking in the background is clear from his exclusion of hedonism as a fitting way of making use of one's time until

death's inevitable arrival. Despite these allusions to Christian notions in "At a Graveside", however, it remains true that the discourse does not adopt an overtly Christian perspective on death.

This raises the question of why Kierkegaard has undertaken this unsuccessful, partial suppression of Christianity in the discourse. My contention is that Kierkegaard has adopted this strategy to prevent the reader from moving too quickly from the thought of death to the promise of an afterlife. The danger is that the Christian hope can itself become a strategy for avoiding applying the thought of death to oneself. It is as if the nominal Christian, as Kierkegaard considered most of his contemporaries to be, wanted to bypass the suffering of the crucifixion and move directly to the glory of the resurrection. Christian categories can themselves be misused to evade the thought of death unless they are first purged of misconceptions. In a journal entry written six years after the publication of "At a Graveside" Kierkegaard states that Christianity wants to bring us as close to the thought of death as possible, but "in our relationship to Christianity we are like the person who deposits a sum with a burial society, a relationship of possibility, and reckon to become Christians in death" (JP 1, 725/ *Pap.* X3 A 710, n.d. 1851). If our "Christian" engagement with death consists merely of paying our church membership fees and taking out insurance to pay for our funeral, then despite our claims to be Christians we are failing to face death earnestly.

Before the Christian categories can be introduced, it is thus necessary to detach the individual from inadequate notions of death and from cowardly strategies aimed at repressing the thought of death. This means initially treating the thought of death without reference to the Christian hope. Reliance on the Christian doctrine of resurrection can all too easily eliminate the existential force of the thought of death. In order to appreciate the Christian promise, it is therefore necessary to begin by not assuming it. It is only when the individual is forced to use the *present* moment as fully as possible because of his/ her awareness of death that the possibility arises of genuinely turning to God. In this respect, death, as Kierkegaard observes in a later journal entry, is like confession in that they both individualize the

human being in the presence of God: “The situation of confession has a similarity to that of death: to be entirely alone – before God” (JP 1, 725 / *Pap.* X3 A 710). Death, although a universal condition, individualizes in a way that no other event can. It is thus vital that we should first contemplate death in all its starkness and not move too quickly to the Christian hope, otherwise we will not truly appreciate this hope.

This is this motive, I contend, for the downplaying in “At a Graveside” of the Christian understanding of death and the hope of an afterlife. To move too quickly to the Christian doctrine of the resurrection robs the Christian categories of their force and drags them down into the aesthetic. To obviate this danger, Kierkegaard’s reflections on death in this discourse are intentionally “this-worldly”.⁸ This necessitates the effacement of references to the Christian understanding of death and resurrection. Such Christian categories can be introduced only on the basis of a preparatory non-Christian reflection on death.

“At a Graveside” thus expresses only the first premise of the Christian dialectic of death, namely, the earnest and honest application of the thought of death to oneself without compromise and without fleeing prematurely to the Christian hope of an afterlife. The second premise of the Christian dialectic of death, namely, faith in resurrection, lies *outside* “At a Graveside”. The distinctively Christian term of death’s dialectic, namely the resurrection hope, is implied but not stated openly. As such, “At a Graveside” can be read as the attempt to lead the reader by means of the cultivation of earnestness in the face of death from the aesthetic sphere towards the ethical. To borrow Climacus’ phrase, the discourse can be read as the attempt to answer “the question of an ethical expression for the meaning of death”, but it has not yet fully arrived at “a religious expression for vanquishing it” (*SKS* 7, 156 / *CUP* 1, 169).

There may be a further reason for Kierkegaard’s downplaying of the Christian understanding of death and the hope of an afterlife in “At a

⁸ It is the this-worldly reflection on death in “At a Graveside” that was subsequently taken up by later thinkers, notably Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, who present a secularized version of the conception of death advanced in Kierkegaard’s discourse.

Graveside”. The allusion to, rather than the full exposition of the God-relationship as one of the possibilities opened up by the thought of death, is fully consistent with the “earnestness” of the project in which Kierkegaard is engaged. As he himself points out, no human being can teach another human being earnestness. It would be a lack of earnestness on Kierkegaard’s part, then, if he were to show *how* earnestness can lead to a God-relationship. In full compatibility with the earnestness of his exposition of the earnestness of death, Kierkegaard sketches only how the thought of death can open up possibilities for how human beings can learn to live earnestly in the face of death. What form this earnestness takes in your or my life, once the earnest thought of death has awoken us from our slumbers, is a decision that only you and I can make as individual selves. Anything else would not be earnest.

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Art and the End of the World in Kierkegaard

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Abstract. Any interpretation of Kierkegaard's relation to art must account for the contradiction that he both dedicated extraordinary attention to aesthetics and condemned it as the lowest of the stages of existence. This article attempts such a task in three steps. First, it examines Kierkegaard's notion of beauty as the sensuous embodiment of ideas, a conception he shares with his Danish and German contemporaries. Second, it shows how Kierkegaard follows Hegel in taking this definition to also impose precise internal and historical limits on art. Finally, the paper suggests that Kierkegaard conceives of the religious as a way to overcome these limitations and provide an alternative way to justify the absolute value of immediate experience.

Keywords: Beauty, the end of art, religion and aesthetics, the concept of world.

While it has long been acknowledged that literature is one of the main areas in which Kierkegaard has exercised an influence, it is only in recent years that the topic has been subject to extensive scholarly attention. This has taken the form both of historical and theoretical approaches. In the former group, there have been numerous reception studies, both of literature's influence on Kierkegaard (Ziolkowski, 2011; Nun and Stewart, 2015), and of Kierkegaard's influence on literature (Houe, 2015; Lisi, 2013a; Stewart, 2013; Malik, 1997). Among the latter, one can find studies that derive models

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for understanding literary works from Kierkegaard, and others that use literary models for an understanding of Kierkegaard. For example, Kierkegaard's concepts of the self and of faith have been made productive for an understanding of literary forms (Ong, 2019; Lisi, 2013b; Jørgensen, 1978). And, inversely, forms of literary discourse have been used to understand Kierkegaard's writings.¹

If this abundance of scholarship makes clear the importance of Kierkegaard for literature, and of literature for Kierkegaard, it's very success and significance risks obscuring what is unquestionably the most remarkable aspect of Kierkegaard's multifaceted relation to art: his rejection of the aesthetic as the lowest of the "stages of existence." In sharp contrast to almost everyone else during his time, with the key exception of Hegel, Kierkegaard does not take art to be the highest achievement of humanity, but rather sees it as a form of life and knowledge that we must strive to overcome.

Any engagement with the importance literature holds for Kierkegaard must come to terms with this seeming contradiction. In this article I will attempt such a task in three steps. First, I look at Kierkegaard's notion of art as the sensuous embodiment of ideas, a conception he shares with his Danish and German contemporaries. Second, I examine how Kierkegaard follows Hegel more specifically in taking this definition of beauty to also impose precise internal and historical limits on art. As sensuous embodiment of the idea, art cannot help but fall short of our highest vocations and shows itself to be inadequate to the conditions of modern experience. Finally, in a third section, I suggest how Kierkegaard conceives of the religious as a way of overcoming these intrinsic and historical limitations.

What becomes clear against this background is, on the one hand, that Kierkegaard's rejection of artistic means of representation does not imply an abandonment of the task he associates with the aesthetic: that of rendering immediate experience absolutely meaningful and valid. To Kierkegaard, the

¹ Notable here are earlier studies such as Poole 1993, Fenves 1993, and Garff 1995, which draw on deconstructive theory in their reading of Kierkegaard. More recently, Davenport 2012 has drawn on narratological models for an understanding of Kierkegaard's ethical form of life in particular.

religious earns its authority largely due to its ability to satisfy this primordial purpose. But, on the other hand, the way in which the religious achieves this goal radically breaks with modern conceptions of art. Specifically, I want to argue, what Kierkegaard's religious abandons is the idea of "world" as the guiding criterion for human and aesthetic intelligibility. As a consequence, the religious opens up a wholly new way of thinking the conditions of meaning, one that, further, may hold particular theoretical interest now, when the age of the Anthropocene brings us face to face with the destruction of our world.

1. The Essence of Beauty

To understand how Kierkegaard could simultaneously make literature such a central aspect of his writing and reject art as having merely limited value, it is important to keep in mind that he takes for granted the conception of beauty as the sensuous embodiment of the idea. In his adherence to that general formula, Kierkegaard follows the idealist position articulated by thinkers like Schelling and Hegel, which also dominated the Danish cultural landscape of his day. Henrich Steffens, for example, in the seminal lecture series from 1803 that is traditionally credited with initiating the Romantic movement in Denmark, describes classical beauty as the identity of the subjective and objective, the embodiment of reason in exteriority (Steffens, 1968, p. 131). In 1834, Kierkegaard's teacher, F. C. Sibbern, who, like Steffens, was deeply influenced by Schelling, similarly asserts that poetry does not imitate the empirical world but rather allows universal values to step forth in ideal forms of nature (Sibbern, 1834, pp. 209-210).² Another of Kierkegaard's teachers who exercised important influence on him, P. L. Møller, followed suit in a positive review of Sibbern's book, in which he reiterates the same position (Møller, 1856, p. 210). And J.

² "Men altid gaaer dog Poesie og Kunst ud paa at lade noget Ideelt træde frem for os i Skikkelser eller Udtalelser, der ere lige saa individuelle, som Naturens egne. Det Ideelle i en individuel Fremtræden, det individuelle, fremstillet eller udtalt saaledes, at noget Ideelt sees at røre sig og leve deri, dette bliver altid Poesiens og Konstens Gjenstand."

L. Heiberg, in his Hegelian approach from the same years, likewise opens the last movement of his lectures on speculative logic with the assertion that, “The speculative idea in its immediate expression is the beautiful or the aesthetic idea” (Heiberg, 1861a, p. 369).

The metaphysical implications and commitments of this view of art by far exceed what can be discussed in this article. For our immediate purposes, it may be sufficient to recall that the formula comes out of Schiller’s attempt to secure objectivity for Kant’s merely subjective form of aesthetic judgment.³ Whereas Kant derives the principles of aesthetic judgment purely with reference to the cognitive faculties of the transcendental subject, Schiller insists on the need for objective criteria for beauty’s appearance in the world. In his famous *Kallias* letters, he tries to secure these through the argument that the autonomous organization of natural phenomena is an analogue to the form of our practical reason. To the extent that a phenomenon does not display external causes or purposes, it looks to be what it is only through itself, making its outer appearance an expression of its inner nature. It thereby counts as beautiful since we recognize in it the form of our own freedom. As Schiller puts it in one of his most famous statements: “Beauty, then, is nothing but freedom in appearance.”⁴

In Kierkegaard, this line of thought comes to mean that beauty cancels the contradiction between inner (essence) and outer (appearance) that otherwise defines our experience.⁵ What art provides is thus a contemplation in which, as *The Concept of Irony* puts it, “essence must manifest itself as phenomenon” (CI 329 / SKS I, 357). Or, in the words of Kierkegaard’s later pseudonym, Frater Taciturnus, “Poetry consists in the commensuration of the

³ The importance of Schiller in this respect was emphasized long ago by Wilhelm Windelband 1907, p. 314; and Windelband, 1921, pp. 220-1, pp. 222-3. More recently, Paul Guyer has also brought out the importance of Schlegel’s *Studium*-essay in the development of this line of thought (Guyer, 2014, p. 30).

⁴ “Schönheit also ist nichts anders als Freiheit in der Erscheinung” (Schiller, 1993, p. 400). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

⁵ In this context, see Victor Eremitas famous treatment of this condition in the Preface to *Either/Or* (EOI 3. / SKS I, 11). Ultimately, this condition is grounded in sin for Kierkegaard (CUP 267-8/ SKS 7, 243; CA 19 / SKS 4, 326).

outer and the inner, and it therefore shows a visible result. The result is plain and easy to grasp” (*SLW* 441 / *SKS* 6, 408).

A closer indication of what this means can be found in the discussion of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* in *Stages on Life’s Way*. There Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Frater Taciturnus, asserts that: “Poetry is connected with immediacy and thus cannot think a duplexity [*Duplicitet*]” (*SLW* 405 / *SKS* 6, 376). The point is that Shakespeare’s heroes must have *all* aspects of their appearance (physical as well as agential) derived from their ideal nature as lovers. Poetry does not allow for duplicity of the sort that would make *some* of their actions and properties explicable by one principle (say, family honor) and *others* by another (say, erotic love). Such complexity would deprive the character of its status as an absolute incarnation of an idea since its allegiances would be split and its character subject to more than one logic. For the properly aesthetic hero, any conflict must instead be exclusively external: the opposition to his defining value must come from a force outside the hero himself. Thus, for Romeo, the feud between Montagues and Capulets never makes him question his commitments to Juliet (it never makes him think of himself as his father’s son rather than Juliet’s lover). To him the feud is only an external obstacle that prevents him consummating his desired end. Tragedy lies in such shipwreck of an ideal hero on the world that does not allow him to fulfill his destined goal (*SLW* 406 / *SKS* 6, 378). For the same reason, as Taciturnus explores at greater length (*SLW* 452-5 / *SKS* 6, 417-9), Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* constitutes an artistic failure, since neither Prince nor play can make up their mind as to whether the idea that he embodies is that of avenger of his father’s honor, Ophelia’s lover, Claudius’ rival for the throne, the instrument of providence, or the victim of incestuous desires (*SLW* 407 / *SKS* 6, 377).⁶

In a later reflection on Shakespeare’s youthful lovers – motivated by Johanne Louise Heiberg’s performance as Juliet at the Royal Theatre at the age of thirty-one, the role that had secured her fame when she debuted fourteen years earlier –, Kierkegaard makes clear that the relation between

⁶ I have explored Kierkegaard’s writings about Hamlet at greater length in Lisi 2015.

idea and immediacy at stake in the aesthetic cannot be accidental. The idea that Juliet represents is in this instance identified as that of “feminine youthfulness,” which may lead one to assume that it finds its most suited embodiment in a young actress of seventeen. But at that age, the possession of attributes of youthfulness are merely accidental, merely the product of the actress’ actual age. An aesthetically more essential representation of that same idea is only found when the actress has gained sufficient distance in her immediate existence from the idea in question, such that her expression of it is the product not of chance, but of her conscious moulding of her being into conformity with the idea: “because in ideality it holds true that the best power is the consciousness and transparency that know how to make use of the essential power, but note well, in the service of the idea” (*CC* 321 / *SKS* 14, 105). Beauty in the highest sense is the externalization of an idea that exhibits the labor of self-consciousness in the conditions of immediate existence.

Behind these descriptions lies the decidedly classicist understanding of art as a harmonious identity of form and content. As Kierkegaard states in his preamble to his discussion of Don Giovanni in volume one of *Either/Or*: for every artistic idea there is a medium that best suits it. The more concrete the idea (the more properties that differentiate its content), the more its medium must be able to articulate differentiations and nuances. The idea behind Homer’s *Illiad*, for example, is derived from history and it contains an excess of details that can only be named by means of language. In contrast, the idea of Mozart’s Don Giovanni is pure sensuousness, which is a universal category rather than tied to specific individuals. It therefore demands a medium far removed from conceptual determination in order to do its abstraction justice, which is what music provides. When content and medium come together in this appropriate manner, we get a work of classic beauty: “Only where the idea is brought to rest and transparency in a definitive form can there be any question of a classic work” (*EOI* 54 / *SKS* 2, 61).

2. The End of Art

As mentioned, these descriptions of art follow the broad contours of the idealist aesthetics of Kierkegaard's day. Where he departs from most of his contemporaries and predecessors, however, is in his unequivocal embrace of Hegel's famous, and controversial, claim that this very definition of art as the sensuous appearance of the idea necessarily restricts its possibilities and importance. As Hegel writes in the Introduction to his lectures on aesthetics, art's sensuousness means it can only express truth that is compatible with the forms of immediate experience, which is to say that it can only represent "one sphere and stage of truth." In modernity, however, we have come to understand that truth transcends what is immediately visible in the world, and we therefore have recourse to philosophy as the proper medium of knowledge: "The peculiar nature of artistic production and of works of art no longer fills our highest need. We have got beyond venerating works of art as divine and worshipping them" (Hegel 1999, pp. 9-10 / Hegel 1986, pp. 23-4).⁷

This view is wholly absent in the Danish context. Neither Steffens nor Sibbern indicate anything like it, and instead treat poetry as equivalent to philosophy, not subordinate to it (e.g. Steffens, 1968, pp. 27-8; Sibbern, 1834, p. 221). In this they follow Schelling, who, in his *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, had elevated art to the highest (and, for philosophy, necessary) intuition we can have of the absolute (Schelling, 2000, p. 299). Even Heiberg, writing before the publication of Hegel's lectures, departs from the master on this point. As he puts it in his influential essay, *Om Philosophiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid*: far from rendering art and poetry superfluous, philosophy will provide them with the social recognition they currently lack, since it cannot do without them (Heiberg, 1861b, p. 408). In Denmark, therefore, the future is bright since the age of classical art is only just about to start (Heiberg, 1861c, p. 13).

⁷ For a more detailed engagement of Hegel's end of art thesis in relation to Kierkegaard, see Lisi 2020a.

According to Kierkegaard, however, the limitations of art are visible in two respects in particular. The first is immanent to art itself and concerns the ways in which its medium (immediate experience) necessarily restricts the kind of truth it can embody. An example of this fact is found, in Kierkegaard's view, in the relation between Faust and Gretchen in Goethe's famous play. To Faust, Kierkegaard explains, Gretchen's beauty lies in her "immediacy of the spirit" (*EOI*, 206 / *SKS* 2, 201). The meaning of this claim is perhaps most clearly expressed through Kierkegaard's contrast of the two lovers: "He is a doubter, but as such he has all the elements of the positive within himself, for otherwise he would be a sorry doubter. He lacks the point of conclusion [*Slutningspunktet*], and thereby all the elements become negative. She, however, has the point of conclusion, has childlikeness and innocence" (*EOI*, 209/ *SKS* 2, 204). "Positive" moments are furthermore equated with the rich content of knowledge or intuitions ("Anskuelsens rige Indhold"), which means that Faust's doubt does not consist in a lack of data (uncertainty because we simply do not know enough), but rather in the lack of a principle according to which that data can be organized: the idea that constitutes their unifying "Slutningspunkt." Gretchen, on the other hand, has precisely such a principle of organization, because in her innocence ("Uskyld"; cf. *FT* 109 / *SKS* 4, 198) she simply does not know enough to make such unification of experience problematic (she may not be aware of the contradictions of life or of the deeper problems it involves). Faust's pleasure in Gretchen, accordingly, is described as teaching her the content of intuitions that to him are only available in negative terms (simply as different from each other), and seeing her incorporate them into the positive form of her world-view (*EOI* 209 / *SKS* 2, 204).

What makes Gretchen a figure of the aesthetic, then, is that her immediate existence expresses an unproblematic confidence in the world as coherent and meaningful. But it can do so only because she is not aware of the complexities and contradictions that the world's various elements in fact contain. The ability to inhabit a unified idea of life in immediate existence depends on a naïveté or lack of reflexivity that, to Kierkegaard's consistently

misogynistic mind, is most frequently exemplified by women. If art offers us a vision of the harmony of life, it only does so, accordingly, at the price of its simplification, which is always a partial falsification. The thought behind this view is similar to Hegel's argument that art, in order to produce an immediate unity of experience, must necessarily purify reality of everything that does not serve this purpose (Hegel, 1999, 155 / Hegel, 1986, 206). Faust recognizes this, which is why he cannot commit to Gretchen, and why he knows that she will inevitably shipwreck. Or, in the words of Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony*: "To that extent, poetry is a kind of reconciliation, but it is not the true reconciliation, for it does not reconcile me with the actuality in which I am living" (CI 297 / SKS I, 330).

It is important to note that this inability of art to express the truth of experience in its full complexity is nevertheless not limited to examples of existential naiveté that characterize the aesthetic in a strict sense. It is clearly visible even in cases Kierkegaard associates with the more advanced ethical form of life. For example, in his defence of marriage as the proper actualization of the aesthetic, Judge William, in the second half of *Either/Or*, argues that the ideal of love can be embodied in reality if the couple forms its everyday experience into the task of giving thanks to God for the gift that their love constitutes. Under those conditions, love receives both reflexivity and historical continuity, two features the aesthetic otherwise lacks, since the ideal is not present all at once, but rather serves as goal for the ongoing process of forming our immediate experience in accordance with its demands. It is not difficult to see that such a structure has strong affinities with the form of the Bildungsroman, in which the story's end likewise reveals how particular experiences have served the actualization of an ideal identity (and, likely, the Judge's name must be understood as an allusion to Goethe's paradigmatic hero). But, crucially, the possibility of organizing life in accordance with a guiding purpose of this kind is predicated on a purification of experience not unlike the one thematized in volume one of *Either/Or*. As the Judge puts it, in marriage, the commitment to our beloved that constitutes the formal principle of our life involves a kind of reflection that deprives

alternatives to our stated purpose (the pursuit of other erotic interests, for example) of real ontological weight: “precisely in its validity it is seen as something that should not have validity” (*EO2* 98 / *SKS* 3, 109). What this means is that the lover simultaneously reflects on other individuals he *could* pursue instead (they have an epistemological validity in that sense), and yet treats such alternatives as irrelevant a priori, as not truly existentially valid options. The real fact of interest that might challenge our commitment to our spouse is thus related to only in the modality of obstacles to be overcome, not in that of actual possibilities that might lay a claim on us. As a consequence, as some critics have noted, Judge William’s relation to his world is one in which he simply fails to recognize the actuality of anything that might properly challenge the form he seeks to give his life. This includes, most importantly, the reality of his wife, who enters his field of vision only as a disembodied face with no existence of her own (*EO2* 83 / *SKS* 3, 86).⁸

A similar situation is at stake, for Kierkegaard, in the novels of Thomasine Gyllembourg, for which he held a lifelong admiration, and which he likewise describes as located between the aesthetic and the religious (*TA* 14-5 / *SKS* 8, 18). In these works, too, the harmonious whole the poet achieves is possible only because the world that is to be unified is reduced to the sphere of bourgeois domesticity, in which the contradictions to be overcome can be managed because they are smaller. Any pursuit of meaning in the larger domain of politics and history is deliberately abandoned for the sake of these more modest, partial victories (*TA* 20 / *SKS* 8, 22; *PSL* 65 / *SKS* 1, 23).⁹

In addition to the limitations internal to the medium of art itself, Kierkegaard also points to historical conditions that make it impossible in

⁸ See especially the analysis in Garff, 1995, pp. 110-14, who provocatively suggests Wilhelm may be trying to suppress the fact that his wife is having an affair with A.

⁹ To Kierkegaard, Gyllembourg’s final novel, *To Tidsaldrer*, therefore constitutes a deviation in her authorship, both because she there engages in historical reflection (*TA* 32, 41 / *SKS* 8, 32, 41), and because that historical dimension allows her characters to fully obtain their ideals in the external world, rather than forcing them into the usual resignations (*TA* 39 / *SKS* 8, 39-40).

modernity. Again following Hegel, Kierkegaard's assertion here is that the modern world is governed by a mode of reflexivity that is inherently opposed to the immediacy of beauty, what Hegel often refers to as the "prose of the world" (Hegel, 1999, 150 / Hegel 1986, 199).¹⁰ Perhaps the clearest description of this condition comes in *Stages on Life's Way*. In that work, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Taciturnus declares that, "poetry's day seems to be over," and, again, "That the time of poetry is over really means that immediacy is at an end" (*SLW* 412 / *SKS* 6, 382). These assertions are once more specified with recourse to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*:

In our day, unhappy love does not make a good show. We go to see *Romeo and Juliet* but really do not know what to make of it; at most it is the gallery that actually weeps. Besides, it is to Shakespeare rather than to Juliet that a tear is offered, and in the theatre we feel ourselves in an almost embarrassing situation. Quite simply, this is because to love, like all passion, has become dialectical to the present generation. An immediate love such as that is incomprehensible, and in our day even a grocer's boy would be able to tell *Romeo and Juliet* some astounding truths. (*SLW* 407 / *SKS* 6, 378)

The problem art faces in modernity, according to this view, is that our age has become too reflexive to view experiences and phenomena as self-sufficient and self-explanatory. Rather than recognizing *Romeo and Juliet*'s behaviour as a direct embodiment of an ideal conception of love, we know that its meaning must be explained by a variety of conditions and contexts that exceed it: the hormonal development of youth, their lack of knowledge of each other, the socio-economic privilege they enjoy, their role in the larger history of a political struggle between two families, and so on and so forth. Instead of allowing ourselves to be absorbed by the direct disclosure of absolute values, the modern spectator recognizes that the real meaning of experience can only become apparent when it is placed in relation to more than

¹⁰ For an excellent analysis of Hegel's argument that rise of understanding marks the end of art, see Chapter 2 of Menke, 1996.

its own immediacy. To the extent that it exists at all, as Hegel also notes, modern art is superseded by criticism (Hegel, 1999, p. 11 / Hegel, 1986, p. 27).

Articulated more abstractly, the structure of such modern knowledge is “discursive” or “mechanical” instead of aesthetic, in a twofold sense important to Kierkegaard. On the one hand, it is analytic insofar as any phenomenon is comprehensible only by grouping it together with others that can be identified as similar in virtue of a shared characteristic. That common term is the abstract concept under which individuals are classified simply as examples, at the expense of the ability to recognize the features that make them individuals (whereas art is always the knowledge of individuality). On the other hand, these analytic concepts are merely finite insofar as they do not entail any necessary relation to other concepts. The possibility of organizing phenomena into meaningful relations thus depends on the introduction of an external purpose that provides the end for which the concepts can serve as means. In modernity, such ends are merely finite insofar as they are derived from our bodily or worldly concerns.¹¹ To understand a phenomenon like love, we must classify it as an instance of a type (e.g. hormonal activity) and understand the contingent purpose that guides it (e.g. propagation of the species or social status).

Kierkegaard’s most encompassing critique of modernity as the age of reflection in this sense comes in his glowing discussion of Thomasine Gyllembourg’s novel *Two Ages*. But perhaps it is his early, devastating attack on H. C. Andersen that spells out most clearly what he takes to be the stakes involved. For Kierkegaard, at issue in Andersen’s novel *Kun en Spillemand* is not simply the failings of a particular text (which are unquestionably plentiful), nor even the broader insecurities of Andersen’s individual psychology (which Kierkegaard maliciously relishes to expose). Rather, the real concern for Kierkegaard is the way Andersen’s novel identifies a crisis of modernity at large. This is so because Andersen tells the story of a genius who is prevented from the success he deserves due to the insurmountable

¹¹ I discuss the importance of Kierkegaard’s critique of this kind of knowledge for his aesthetic practice in more detail in Lisi 2017, pp. 77-82.

obstacles presented by a hostile world. Such a loss of faith in the ability of immediacy to express ideal values constitutes the nihilism of modernity.¹² For the young Kierkegaard, however, such pessimism is not an instance of the tragic, but rather a personal shortcoming on Andersen's part, a sign of his seduction by fashionable movements such as the Young Germany (*PSL* 93 / *SKS* I, 49). If his hero fails to embody his ideal meaning in life, that is not because life cannot allow for ideality, but because Andersen has misidentified what the meaning of his hero is (*PSL* 100 / *SKS* I, 55). Yet from the perspective of the later Kierkegaard, it is clear that Andersen's failed Bildungsroman has hit upon an important historical truth. Under the conditions of modernity, art as the immediate appearance of ideas has indeed become obsolete.

3. Faith at the End of the World

What Kierkegaard's analysis of the immanent and historical limits of art lays bare, then, is a condition in which, on the one hand, our immediate experience fails to express true meaning, and, on the other, the discursive nature of meaning that characterizes modernity lacks immediate reality. The latter condition is no more viable than the former. As Taciturnus emphasizes in *Stages on Life's Way*, insofar as we do not cease existing as immediately embodied individuals, any structure of meaning that abstracts from that condition is necessarily inadequate (*SLW* 483 / *SKS* 6, 445). Rather than abandon the aesthetic project of embodying meaning in immediacy, therefore, what is needed is a different way of achieving that same aim.¹³

For Kierkegaard, such a task is only possible if we arrive at a new conception of the conditions both of our immediacy and of our meanings. It is at this point, however, that he distinguishes himself most forcefully from

¹² Kierkegaard's concern with the nihilism of modernity and its relation to literature has been examined by Soderquist 2007.

¹³ Interestingly, Robert Pippin has recently presented a similar argument for the need to reject Hegel's end of art thesis based on Hegel's own philosophical commitments (Pippin, 2014, pp. 45-6).

his contemporaries by consistently rejecting the view that such a revolution in our consciousness can be achieved by new forms of philosophy or art. The former option is associated with Hegel's elaboration of a speculative logic, which Kierkegaard discards as illegitimate, largely by relying on the arguments levelled against Hegel by Adolph Trendelenburg, in his 1840 work, *Logische Untersuchungen*.¹⁴ In the present context, the more interesting topic is Kierkegaard's response to the concomitant aesthetic attempt, which is tied to J. L. Heiberg's notion of a new form of "speculative drama," exemplified in his 1838 play *Fata Morgana*. That work, which proved a resounding failure on stage, was prominently defended by H. L. Martensen in an influential review.¹⁵

Writing a few years after the publication of Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Martensen begins his discussion by accepting the description of the current age as one of philosophy rather than aesthetics (Martensen, 1838, pp. 366-7). Art, he declares, is in crisis because modernity has recognized a truth that exceeds the conditions of traditional aesthetic representation (Martensen, 1838, p. 362). For Martensen, however, and unlike for Hegel, this does not constitute a principled opposition, but merely a transitory one. What the current age demands is simply the invention of a literary form that will be able to render the new philosophical content poetically (Martensen, 1838, p. 361). Heiberg's play, profoundly misunderstood by the common audience, Martensen insists, offers precisely such a new form. Its effect – as the effect of all great art – is to unify the disparate elements of experience into a harmonious whole (Martensen, 1838, pp. 368-9).

Kierkegaard addresses Heiberg and Martensen's aesthetic project in *Stages on Life's Way*. As Frater Taciturnus writes there:

So poetry's day seems to be over, tragedy in particular. A comic poet will lack an audience, since not even the audience can be two

¹⁴ Kierkegaard's embrace of Trendelenburg's critique of Hegel's claim to having developed a purely speculative logic is prominent especially in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. For an overview of Kierkegaard's relation to Trendelenburg and an accompanying bibliography on the topic, see González, 2007.

¹⁵ For a detailed account of Martensen's review, cf. Stewart, 2012.

places at once, on the stage and in the auditorium. Moreover, a comic poet has his own residence [*Tilhold*] in a pathos that lies outside the play and which shows by its existence that the day of poetry is over. Someone who pins his hope on speculative drama serves poetry only insofar as he serves the comic. If a witch or a wizard succeeds in bringing about such a thing, if by means of a speculative thaumaturgist (for a dramaturgist would not suffice) it would satisfy the requirement for the age as a *poetic* work, this event would certainly be a good motif for a comedy, even though it would achieve the comic effect through so many presuppositions that it could not become popular. (*SLW* 412 / *SKS* 6, 382; translation slightly modified.)

Taciturnus' opening assertion turns on his distinction between tragedy and comedy. Whereas the former represents a hero who directly embodies an ideal value, comedy involves a hero who mistakenly thinks he represents a value that he cannot in fact embody (like Don Quixote believing he is a knight, or Hamlet, on Taciturnus' reading, believing he is the tool of providence; *SLW* 472 / *SKS* 6, 435). Insofar as immediacy can no longer embody ideality directly, tragedy is impossible, but comedy can continue, since it depends only on a negative relation between idea and particularity. Furthermore, comedy does not risk the embarrassing situation of tragedy, in which the audience cannot believe the tragic heroes, the way we no longer believe in Romeo and Juliet's love. To the contrary, and true to its traditional definition, because comedy does not deal with unbelievable ideal types, it can pick its characters from among the sceptical citizens of the contemporary world, such as the grocer's boy who could tell Shakespeare's lovers uncomfortable truths.

This kind of comedy, however, the passage further tells us, runs into two problems. First, if it represents our own reflexive culture, then it will lack an audience, since the audience must be one that can laugh at the represented characters from the higher perspective of an idea the characters themselves fail to grasp. We cannot be both the characters laughed at and the audience laughing; if we laugh, then, the characters no longer represent us, but rather a lower state of consciousness that we have overcome. Second, the claim that the comic poet resides in a pathos that lies outside the play, points

to the fact that the idea on the basis of which we recognize that the characters do not in fact live up to their own values is not directly represented in the play (there are no real knights in Cervantes' text, for example). As such, even if comedies may still be successfully produced, they do not in fact constitute poetry in a strict sense, since poetry must be the direct embodiment of ideal values, not their indirect inference through negation, which necessarily is a form of reflexivity. The persistence of comedies thus merely proves the obsolescence of poetry.

Speculative drama, then, will only be poetic in the limited sense of comedy: it depicts the reflexive present from the vantagepoint of an idea that it does not enact directly. This is in line with the frequent critique of Heiberg's play that it is nothing more than didactic allegory, one that asserts a philosophical doctrine without embodying it in sensuous immediacy. In the paragraph's final sentence, however, Taciturnus, entertains the possibility that someone (clearly someone other than Heiberg) might in fact succeed in giving the play's speculative idea an actual poetic expression (a possibility Taciturnus deems unlikely in the extreme, as indicated by the claim that it would require a magician more than a poet). In that case, the poet's sympathies would no longer reside in a pathos located outside the play. Instead, the idea against which the failures of our sceptical age are judged would find positive representation in the work, and we would have a comedy of a higher order, one in which the movement of negation leads to a new immediacy and which could, therefore, count as poetic in the strict sense. However, even if this were possible, such a play would also fail to have an audience (it could not become popular, as the passage has it), since the conditions of the transformation of experience would be too difficult for people to understand. As with tragedy, then, we would find ourselves in a situation where the audience could no longer understand the world and characters represented in the play, which would mean, again, that the age of poetry is over.

As an initial account of why Kierkegaard refuses the idea that there is an aesthetic path to a new positive relation between idea and immediacy,

this critique of speculative drama is highly suggestive. But in order to understand the deeper concerns at stake here, it is necessary to look at Kierkegaard's conception of the religious. For, in Kierkegaard's view, the task of articulating the conditions for an absolutely valid immediacy cannot lie with either philosophy or poetry, and must rather be found in faith. As he emphasizes, if the age of aesthetic immediacy has come to an end, "then it is a matter of attaining the religious" (*SLW* 415 / *SKS* 6, 384). And further, the kind of reflexivity that the religious involves is not destructive of immediacy, by leaving it behind the way the abstractions of reason do, but rather constitutes "immediacy's transparency to itself" (*SLW* 414 / *SKS* 6, 383). Even if Kierkegaard consistently and vehemently distinguishes between the religious and the aesthetic, there is thus a key sense in which the religious in fact fulfils the aims that the aesthetic sets itself but fails to achieve on its own terms.¹⁶

The sense in which this may be the case is perhaps illustrated most forcefully in Kierkegaard's oeuvre through his engagement with another archetypal narrative of Western culture, the Binding of Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*. According to Kierkegaard, the most important point in this Biblical story is that Abraham does not obtain his status as father of faith through a willingness to murder his son in an act of blind obedience (*FT* 30 / *SKS* 4, 126). Nor does he obtain it because he is convinced that, no matter how terrible the momentary deed, God will make sure that everything turns out well at the end (*FT* 63 / *SKS* 4, 156). Quite to the contrary, for Abraham, the possibility of murdering his own son rests on the certainty that his actions from the outset immediately embody the value of love (no less than do the actions of Romeo and Juliet). At no moment of the events – when he ties

¹⁶ As Kierkegaard writes with respect to the novels of Thomasine Gyllembourg, the differences between the poetic, the ethical, and the religious are differences in the answers given to the same problem, namely the gap between inner and outer that constitutes the center of Kierkegaard's thought (cf. *PSL* 64-69 / *SKS* 1, 20-5; *TA* 20-21 / *SKS* 8, 22-3). The notion that the religious stands in continuity with the aesthetic is sometimes presented as the view that the religious in fact fails to be anything but a version of the aesthetic. But the point is rather that the religious is a different solution to the problem shared across the different forms of existence Kierkegaard examines.

Isaac's hands, when he hears his cries of terror, when he draws the knife – do his actions deny the idea of fatherly love and protection (*FT* 74 / *SKS* 4, 165). Only if that is the case, can Abraham receive Isaac back without hesitation once God calls off the trial, since he knows that he never betrayed his ideal obligations.

Without doubt, that is a terrible thought, as Kierkegaard insists that it must be, if we are to have any chance of understanding the religious (*FT* 30 / *SKS* 4, 126). But the argument also contains important consequences for aesthetics. For what Kierkegaard is aiming at in his uncompromising defence of Abraham, is the assertion that Christian faith is only possible to the extent that it can redraw the boundaries of our norms no less than those of our sensuous experience. What defines religious experience at its deepest level, according to Kierkegaard, is the confrontation with a normative order that simultaneously specifies the fundamental possibilities of our thought in a new way, and discloses the properties of our immediacy on the basis of wholly new criteria for meaning. In order for Abraham's actions to count as actions of love, or, in order for a pathetic historical individual to count as God, our ideas of love and divinity must be conceived wholly anew. And in order for the same events to embody these new ideas, it must be possible to see other aspects of sensuous experience as relevant than what we are used to (not those of suffering, for example, or at least not as such). Seen from the perspectives of our reason and our immediate experience, such a reorganization of the world is simply nonsense, since it contradicts the conditions of both (love is not aimless murder, humanity is not God, ugliness is not beauty). But in the light of modern nihilism, Kierkegaard claims, it is precisely these conditions that we must abandon, since they are no longer capable of providing our existence with absolute value. The idea, the principle, that allows us to perform such a leap, is not a product of human subjectivity, but a gift of the encounter with another form of being than ours (such as the being of God, or, against Kierkegaard, of the work of art). Meaning in faith is based on the determination of our thought and sensuous experience by a criterion transcendent to our given nature.¹⁷

¹⁷ I have examined this line of argument in Kierkegaard and its importance for aesthetics in greater detail in Lisi 2013b.

To Kierkegaard, it is this fact – that faith does not depend on a human criterion for meaning – which frees it from the constraints that hamper the aesthetic. As he argues in *Stages on Life's Way* (SLW 442-3, 458-9/ SKS 6, 409, 423-4), in poetry the difference between ideas and immediacy can only ever be quantitative. This means that only such aspects of experience can be of poetic value as stand in some form of continuity with their respective idea. As a consequence, a significant part of experience must simply be excluded from the realm of art, since, for example, the idea of power can only be embodied by actions that exceed our strength, the idea of beauty only by appearances that please our senses, and so on. On the other hand, it means that the ideas themselves also find themselves beholden to the conditions of the immediate experience that they must render intelligible: power must have to do with force, love with the protection of the beloved from harm, since these are the natural forms in which we experience these concepts.¹⁸ But in the religious, all this is different. The religious can embody greatness in misery as well as heroism, beauty in sickness as well as health, since there are no a priori constraints for what can count as meaning or experience in the first place. What health and sickness, power and love can mean, does not lie *before*, but *after* the event of faith. Unlike the aesthetic, the religious does not simply embody meaning, but establishes its criteria wholly anew.

This makes it possible to articulate more clearly the deeper reasons behind Kierkegaard's rejection of Heiberg's speculative drama – or, more broadly, of an aesthetic solution to the crisis of modernity –, and to do so in terms that suggest his continuing theoretical interest today. Important here is that Heiberg, in his 1833 *Om Philosophiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid*, originally exemplified the notion of speculative drama with reference to Dante, Calderón de la Barca, and Goethe (Heiberg, 1861b, pp. 418-9). What they all share, for Heiberg, is that they take philosophical knowledge as their

¹⁸ This line of thought is particularly visible in Sibbern, who repeatedly emphasizes that the artist is confined to ideas that are expressible in existing natural forms (Sibbern, 1834, pp. 56-7, 263), and to natural forms that adequately express moral values (e.g. Sibbern 1834, pp. 109-110, where he specifically insists on the impossibility of expressing the ideal of love through fear, in direct contradiction to Kierkegaard's claims about the Binding of Isaac).

object, to the extent that they create “cosmogonies,” didactic poems that display the organization of the world according to the philosophical principles of their time (Heiberg, 1861b, pp. 422-3). As Martensen correctly recognized, for Heiberg, this is precisely what the present cultural moment needs: a poetry that can organize the multiplicity of sensuousness, not simply in accordance with some rational form in general, but specifically in accordance with the form of speculative reason that alone is able to explain the structure of our own contemporary world.

In this recourse to the notion of world for the meaning of speculative poetry, Heiberg in fact adheres to one of the central concepts of modern aesthetics. Even if sketched only in the barest of outlines, which is all that can be done here, the importance of the idea of world in this respect can easily be brought into view.¹⁹ It is central already in Alexander Baumgarten’s 1735 *Reflections on Poetry*, which famously coins the term “aesthetics” (Baumgarten, 1954, 116). In that work, Baumgarten concludes that, “the poem ought to be like a world. Hence by analogy whatever is evident to the philosopher concerning the real world, the same ought to be thought of a poem” (Baumgarten, 1954, 68). For Baumgarten, this claim rests on the view of aesthetics as sensuous cognition (Baumgarten, 1954, 15). What the work of art does is represent an object in its sensuous perfection, meaning that it encompasses the broadest possible range of the object’s particular properties in their unified relation to its general idea, the poem’s “theme” (Baumgarten, 1954, 66). That relation is not deductive or syllogistic, in the manner of rational knowledge (since reason deals only with abstract concepts, not particulars), but rather *analogous* to reason. Specifically, the ordered relation of particulars to their organizing theme is a version of the principle of sufficient reason distinct from the narrow application it finds in the concept of efficient causation (Baumgarten, 1954, 66, 69).²⁰ In spite of their

¹⁹ As Ayesha Ramachandran has lucidly shown, the articulation of the idea of world is in fact central to the project of modernity in general. Kierkegaard’s faith must ultimately be understood against that broader background.

²⁰ Frederick Beiser has rightly insisted on the centrality of a broad understanding of the principle of sufficient reason in the rationalist tradition of aesthetics in general and Baumgarten in particular (Beiser, 2009, pp. 148-9).

differences, accordingly, both logic and aesthetics are subject to the same rational constraints, which are those that determine the nature and relations of objects in our world.

As Baumgarten notes, this does not mean that poetry must imitate the rational structure of empirical objects as they actually exist. But it does mean that poetry has to stick to objects that at least *could* exist. Possible beings are thereby subject not only to demands of internal consistency, but must also conform to the rules for the possible co-existence with other entities in a whole, which is what constitutes a world. Such representations of possible worlds Baumgarten terms “heterocosmic,” since they depict worlds whose content is distinct from ours but which nevertheless agree with the metaphysical conditions of our own (Baumgarten, 1954, 52, 57). What Baumgarten categorically excluded from poetry are “utopian” fictions: works that represent objects incompatible with the rational principles that structure our world (principles like those of sufficient reason or non-contradiction), and which could therefore never exist in actuality (Baumgarten, 1954, 53).²¹ As Baumgarten puts it in his *Metaphysics*: “A dream world is not a world” (Baumgarten, 2017, 359).²²

Crucially, the centrality of the category of world persists in Kant’s forceful rejection of the cognitive value of aesthetic judgments. As Kant argues, in aesthetic judgments we do not refer a representation to the concept of an object, as we do in ordinary knowledge. Instead, we refer the representation to our subjective feelings of pleasure or displeasure by means of the imagination (Kant, 1968, p. 203). These feelings are not the result of

²¹ For Baumgarten’s more extensive critique of utopian fictions, see his discussion of aesthetic falsehood in Baumgarten, 2007, 445-77. See also Baumgarten, 2017, 91: “The confusion opposed to transcendental truth would be a *dream taken as objective*. An aggregate of dreams would be a *fantasy world*.”

²² The importance of Baumgarten’s metaphysical concept of world for later aesthetics is also emphasized by Alfred Bäumler’s analysis of Moritz’ treatment of the autonomous work of art: “Das Schöne ist ein zweckloses Ganzes, d.h. nicht mehr *Teil*. ‚Die Welt ist eine Reihe (Menge, ein Ganzes) endlicher Wirklichkeiten, die nicht Teil einer andern ist,‘ sagt [Baumgarten’s] Metaphysik. Moritzens Ästhetik ist also nichts anderes als eine Übertragung des Weltbegriffs der Metaphysik seiner Zeit in die ästhetische Sphäre“ (Bäumler, 1967, p. 250).

our contingent sensuous dispositions, however (as is the case in the merely agreeable). Rather, they express the extent to which the representation in question reveals itself to be compatible with our faculty of understanding *in general* (Kant, 1968, pp. 217-8). The aesthetic judgment is thus both indeterminate, insofar as it lacks a specific concept or purpose, and universal, insofar as it involves the experience of the interplay of our human faculties of knowledge in general.²³

Even without objective reference, however, this free interplay of faculties reaches beyond mere interiority insofar as it discloses our *sensus communis*: the necessary conditions for intelligible human experience as such (Kant, 1968, pp. 239-40, 293). Although beauty does not provide knowledge about specific objects in the world, that is, it does make available for us the forms of possibility that any such objects must agree with, no less than it did for Baumgarten. On that basis, beauty famously serves as a symbol of a moral world for Kant (Kant, 1968, pp. 353-4). It does so not because it shows us images of specific virtues, but because its organization of the manifold of our sensuousness in accordance with the general demands of reason is a promise that experience can unfold within the transcendental frame of a meaningful totality.

The unification of the rationalist and Kantian conceptions of beauty that Schiller initiates, and which lies behind Kierkegaard's approach to aesthetics, remains wholly faithful to this centrality of the idea of world. In his *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, Schelling argues that art is the identity of I and nature, of freedom and necessity, to the extent that it is the harmonious unification of conscious and unconscious activities (Schelling, 2000, p. 283). The possibility of such a unity is a product of the absolute that is the general ground of the preestablished harmony of these contradicting forces (Schelling, 2000, p. 286). The work of art, therefore, makes available an objective manifestation of the transcendental principle of the world (Schelling, 2000, p. 296). As Schelling emphasizes, it is because the work of

²³ For Kant's more specific criticism of Baumgarten's principle of sensuous perfection, see Kant, 1968, pp. 226-9.

art as a whole is a world, a “Kunstwelt,” that it can embody in an individual object the infinity that underlies our actual world, “die wirkliche Welt,” only in its totality (Schelling, 2000, p. 298).

For the main currents of modern theories of art that Kierkegaard is working with, then, aesthetics is firmly tied to the concept of world because beauty is understood to *justify*, to render transparent and coherent, the sensuous and rational structures that constitute our domain of intelligibility. Or, articulated differently, the significance of aesthetics in modernity lies in large part with the assumption that our existing sensuous and rational structures of experience are justified to the extent that they can construct beautiful worlds. As the argument in *Stages on Life's Way* pointed to above has it, such a view rests on the assumption that either our rational ideas must be able to justify the objects of our natural experience, or that the objects of our natural experience must be such as can be justified by our forms of reason (*SLW* 442-3, 458-9/ *SKS* 6, 409, 423-4). We can locate such worldliness in the object, the subject, or in their unity. But regardless of these differences, Kierkegaard holds, all these views are committed to the idea that only that is art which adequately displays the condition of our world because world alone provides the standards for what can count as meaning. From this perspective, that is, art is art if and only if it can render our worldly experience intelligible; if and only if we can recognize in its structures the conditions that also govern the sensuous and conceptual forms of experience that we know from our worldly comportment. For all its intended innovation, Heiberg's idea of a speculative drama does not question that assumption.

Against this background, it becomes clear how Kierkegaard's refusal of speculative thought, aesthetic as well as philosophical, is principled rather than dependent on its particular executions or receptions (magicians or not). What motivates his move away from aesthetics and towards religion is his rejection of the concept of world as the only (or even an adequate) standard for intelligibility. To the contrary, as we saw, the religious is intended to save the possibility of absolutely meaningful experience by insisting that meaning may not be rational, and that the immediate experience that it justifies, in

turn, may not be confined to the natural forms we know. In this respect, Kierkegaard's religious is utopian precisely in the sense Baumgarten categorically rejects at the outset of the modern tradition of aesthetics. Kierkegaard merely accepts this prohibition when he asserts that faith could never count as an instance of aesthetics, even if it shares its fundamental project of providing immediacy with unconditioned value. What the religious discloses, after all, is not the metaphysical ground of the world we have, but the eruption of a world completely different. On Kierkegaard's insistence, the possibility of counting the Binding of Isaac as an act of love requires dwelling under a new heaven and on a new earth, with new values and new forms of immediacy.²⁴

As a final point, one could argue that Kierkegaard's attempt to think meaning beyond and outside the concept of world is not only what distinguishes him from his predecessors and contemporaries, but also where we find his highest interest for the future. What I have in mind can perhaps be expressed most succinctly with reference to the concept of the Anthropocene. As is generally known, that term refers to our historical period, when humans have become a geological force. That does not mean, however, as is sometimes assumed, that the reign of human agency is extended to the planet as a whole. Rather, the Anthropocene's disclosure of the increasing likelihood of the disappearance of the parametric conditions for our species' survival makes clear that the meaning of human actions have become subject to conditions and timescales that are no longer compatible with the criteria of human intelligibility and life.²⁵ Two consequences that

²⁴ This, of course, does not exclude that other conceptions of art from outside the dominating tradition sketched above may be closer to Kierkegaard's idea of faith. Martin Heidegger's essay "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes" (Heidegger, 2003) in particular seems relevant in this regard, insofar as Heidegger articulates a view of art as transcendent of the conditions of world. The work of art, for Heidegger, is distinguished from ordinary "Zuhandenes" precisely by *not* being an "innerweltliches Seiendes," but rather a kind of thing that straddles "Welt's" relation to "Erde." Art thereby constitutes its own form of normativity, its own "Weise der Wahrheit," distinct from the normativity and meanings found under the condition of "Zuhandenheit."

²⁵ For one of the best explorations of this implication of the Anthropocene, see Chakrabarty, 2014.

have been drawn from this fact is that neither aesthetics nor practical rationality as we traditionally understand them are capable of dealing with our new ontological condition.²⁶ What the Anthropocene requires, from that perspective, is a new understanding of meaning, one not tied to human forms of intentionality. Kierkegaard's related rejection of aesthetics and ethics may reveal itself as highly relevant here. And it may likewise be in this context that his conception of the religious as a form of meaning without world becomes most productive. The horror of Abraham's actions would then show the dangers that we face.²⁷

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²⁶ For an argument that aesthetics falls short of the Anthropocene, see Ghosh, 2016; for an argument about the limits of our traditional ethics, see Jamieson, 2014.

²⁷ I have provided a more succinct argument about Kierkegaard's importance in the context of the Anthropocene in Lisi 2021.

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Long Life's Journey into Truth.

Søren Kierkegaard, Eugene O'Neill and the Woman

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*The misfortune of our age is that everyone speaks the truth –
how much better it must have been to live in an age in which
everyone lied but the stones spoke the truth.¹*

Abstract. This article investigates the literary weight of Søren Kierkegaard in modern theatre, and particularly his influence on Eugene O'Neill, the canonical American tragedian. My main hypothesis is that O'Neill, in the construction of his dramatic characters and in the technique of writing, owes a lot not only to August Strindberg – as he declared himself –, but also to Kierkegaard, through his own (re)readings and through the crucial influence that Kierkegaard has had on Strindberg, Ibsen and Nietzsche. In this regard, the strange and obscure relation between woman and truth, anxiety and mourning is examined *via* three types of femininity: Nina Leeds (from *Strange Interlude*, 1928) who, in search of her femininity, fears losing what she could never have had; Lavinia Mannon (from *Mourning Becomes Electra*, 1929) who, as the ancient Antigone, commits herself to a form of death-in-life, beyond the generic guilt without sin. Lastly, Mary Tyrone (from *Long Day's Journey into Night*, 1940), a substitute of the playwright's mother, the most anguished woman of O'Neill's feminine characters, is a living dead who prematurely began the mourning for her not-ended-life, since commemoration is associated with the utmost painful.

Keywords: tragedy, drama, repetition, femininity, truth, anxiety, mourning.

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¹ S. Kierkegaard, Journal DD: 65-68. 1837, *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, vol. 1, p. 234.

The Tragedy of “I” as Literary Drama

A Modern Tragedy, covered with everlasting, old-fashioned and psychoanalytic dramatic subjects, power, truth and work of autobiography – this could be an appropriate description of Eugene Gladstone O’Neill’s (1888-1953) theatre, that invokes the cultural and poetic form of tragedy written and performed in ancient Greece, but immersed in a distinctive kind of suffering and anguish. If the traditional category of the theatrical explored the collapse of the self-doubled by a catharsis of the loss, this new form of tragedy depicts the intrinsic drama of the character, his transfiguration throughout harmony or disorder, desire and reality. “... We are tragedy, the most appalling yet written or unwritten!”², affirms O’Neill, claiming that the tragic structure of the individual between the centuries is inscribed in a vulnerable faith granting the timeless knowledge of death, and that, moreover, tragedy became more profound and more vivid, pointing to the sickness of today – the realistic tragedy of the modern man. With reference to this particular *Weltanschauung* of the American theatre, the relation between art, reality and the illusion of life represents a crucial aspect that was adopted by a new generation of playwrights: Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee and so on, all of them questioning, in their realistic dramas or tragedies, the working middle-class problems combined with socialist or proletarian doctrines, family mythology, failed bourgeois legacies, revolutionary individual and collective ideas with psychoanalytic implications. In this perspective, considering the Aristotelian theory of tragedy and, over many centuries, the Ibsenian reformed drama, the realist American playwright must search “the inner meaning of events”³ – an intimate realism that reveals the truth, in my own interpretation. Although for Aristotle action and plot are the major partitions in a tragedy (see *De Poetica*), O’Neill’s realistic and even naturalistic characters, in their all-embracing act of living – the act of living as a final purpose – experience the

² Travis Bogard and Jackson R. Bryer, Eds., *Selected Letters of Eugene O’Neill*, p. 159.

³ John Howard Lawson, *Theory and Technique of Playwriting*, pp. 47-48.

impossibility of change despite personal action, due to a generic guilt without sin. The 20th century tragedy is not about a hero or a royal being placed in an unusual situation which pertains to the forces related to anger or to *hybris*, but about a “common man”⁴ who, placed in a tragic position, is ready “to lay down his life to secure his sense of dignity”. Thus, the “wound of indignity” opens a real process of re-evaluation and thus shows the compulsion of a tortured and disillusioned (yet pure) individual towards a psychic view of life. In this sense, O’Neill’s theatrical realism, rooted in the harsh Irish Jansenism and enveloped in an austere New England Puritanism, unmasks the search of a private, almost visceral truth, in an atmosphere of tension between the dramatic *reality* and the deceptive imagination.

Despite the fact that O’Neill’s literary frame of reference is American (and paradoxically, without American precursors), the implicit and the pretextual meanings are as European as possible, being under the unequivocal influence of Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, George Bernard Shaw, Luigi Pirandello and, most importantly, under the constant and continuing influence of August Strindberg, whom he reads in 1912 during his stay in Gaylord Farm Sanatorium because of tuberculosis. It is in this fatidic place that he decides to become a dramatist and assimilates the essence of European philosophical drama – speculative, expressionistic, with long descriptions and confessions/ monologues, yet rather poetical; O’Neill remains, in all his writings, “a stage novelist, a playwright who writes books”⁵, combining theatre plays, melodrama, modern novel etc. My hypothesis is that O’Neill, in the construction of his dramatic characters and in the technique of writing, owes very much not only to August Strindberg, but also to Søren Kierkegaard, through his own (re)readings and through the crucial influence that Kierkegaard has had on Strindberg, Ibsen and Nietzsche. Literary critics compare O’Neill’s masterpieces such as *Mourning*

⁴ The following quotations from this paragraph are from Arthur Miller’s essay *Tragedy and the Common Man*, 1949.

⁵ Anne Fleche, *Mimetic Disillusion. Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams and U.S. Dramatic Realism*, p. 19.

Becomes Electra or *Strange Interlude* to Strindberg's *Inferno* period, *The Iceman Cometh* to *The Dance of Death* or *Long Day's Journey into Night* to *The Ghost Sonata*. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech⁶, O'Neill admits on the one hand that the European modern theatre was a source of inspiration for the American drama/ tragedy, but on the other hand, the original impulse for Strindberg continued over the years and made him, in his struggle for the "survival of his spirit", follow the footsteps of his very modern Master and of his *radiations of the ego*⁷. "It is of particular significance that as time went on, O'Neill turned more to the autobiographical writings than he did to the plays, for it was Strindberg's conception of life that influenced O'Neill in his mature work, and not specific scenes from the plays."⁸ In her memoir book, Agnes Boulton, Gene's second wife, writes about an identification with the great tortured Swede who was, during his entire life, affected by the psychic struggle between the female and the male. In this particular direction, Gene's modern American tragedy recentres the anger at God in a Godless world, it becomes an intermission from his own living and, pre-eminently, it invests tragedy with a more philosophical (even psychoanalytic) aim, putting aside the historical dimension.

Reconsidering the phenomena of theatre, drama and performance⁹, from a philosophical or theological angle, Kierkegaard's interdisciplinary approach is based on his criticism¹⁰ towards the 19th century Copenhagen theatrical institution, the Royal Theatre, on his examination of the artistic and existential acting (for instance Anti-Climacus's imitator of Christ who operates as the man of God) and on the staging of the self as an intricate playwright. In the addendum to the *Postscript*, a very theatrical and

⁶ December 10, 1936 – O'Neill was not present, so the speech was read by James E. Brown, Jr., American Chargé d'Affaires.
(<http://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1936/oneill/speech/>)

⁷ My specific reference to the pilgrimage drama *To Damascus* (I, II – 1898, III – 1904).

⁸ S. K. Winther, "Strindberg and O'Neill: A Study of Influence", p. 105.

⁹ Or equalizing performance and play, theatre and performance (A in *Either/ Or*).

¹⁰ The short writings "Phister as Captain Scipio (in the Comic Opera *Ludovic*). A Recollection and for Recollection", "The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress", and to some extent: "The Immediate Stages of the Erotic, or The Musical Erotic", "The First Love".

antitheatrical text, Kierkegaard portrays himself as a dramatic poet and philosopher, a dramatist of the religious –, not forgetting that in that era *the critique of drama* was in fact *the critique of art*¹¹ as such. Kierkegaard's interest in theatricality also reveals a particular method or craft of staging the words and presenting the ideas in a personal writing. Melpomene, the female muse of tragedy, and Mnemosyne, her mother, the goddess of memory, remain two dominant figures for the Danish when reflecting upon the ordinary repetition that repeats itself into itself (reprise, rehearsal, relapse), the existential repetition (it repeats itself into a new self) and the recollection:

Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward. Repetition, therefore, if it is possible, makes a person happy, whereas recollection makes him unhappy – assuming, of course, that he gives himself time to live and does not promptly at birth find an excuse to sneak out of life again, for example, that he has forgotten something.¹²

If “There is no repetition at all”¹³, then there is no repetition of the same, but a repetition in difference, a different same and a changeless new in the modern theatre, if we take into account that time and space, beginning and ending, memory and audience can never be the same, and the instant and aesthetic truth of the stage cannot be repeated, only reproduced at a mimetic level. Nonetheless, the category of repetition brings to life not only the I of the writer, but also the I of the audience or the I of the actor/ actress that makes an appearance, pointing to the performative dimension of a dramatic text that deals with a creative and unresolved contradiction – the internal

¹¹ See George Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and The Religious. From the Magic Theatre to the Crucifixion of the Image*, chap. “Life in the Magic Theatre. Kierkegaard's Concept of Drama”, pp. 95-124.

¹² Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition* in FT/ R (*Fear and Trembling. Repetition, Kierkegaard's Writings VI*), p. 131.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 169.

repetition, expressed within the individual and turning itself into a *theatre of ideas*¹⁴:

There is probably no young person with any imagination who has not at some time been enthralled by the magic of the theater and wished to be swept along into that artificial actuality in order like a double to see and hear himself and to split himself up into every possible variation of himself, and nevertheless in such a way that every variation is still himself.¹⁵

Likewise, different and metaphoric voices or personae, interior variations or radiations of the character, pseudonyms or heteronyms, all in all an infinite and never identical multiplication of the subject¹⁶ – as Strindberg's *The Stranger (To Damascus)* or O'Neill's feminine characters Mary Tyrone and Nina Leeds –, represent a strategic precondition in the work of the playwright that does not abolish the narratorial authorship but quite the opposite, it enlivens its entity. In the moment of each unrepeatable fragmentation, Constantin Constantius anticipates the freedom of the modern theatre since he writes about the decisive possibility of the human self to choose to split himself from himself in order to remain, in the end, a single self, a single voice, finding in the instance of the theatre a mirror-like experience, a dramatized and projected existence. The shadow-play of the I is created as an independent world inside the world of theatre, yet in relation to the main stage but also *real*; it is, more broadly, the interplay of the I – not I and not-not-I – within a mediation between actuality and theatricality. For Kierkegaard, actual existence is an inter-esse between thinking and being, keeping contradictions alive; thus, immediacy is actuality (in Hegel's sense of *Virkelighed-Wirklichkeit*) and the ethical reality of the individual is the only one.

¹⁴ *Apud*. Martijn Boven, "A Theater of Ideas: Performance and Performativity in Kierkegaard's Repetition" in *Kierkegaard, Literature, and the Arts*, ed. Eric Ziolkowski, pp. 115-129.

¹⁵ S. Kierkegaard, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

¹⁶ See Peter Szondi, *Teoria dramei moderne (1880-1950) [Theory of Modern Drama]*, chap. „Dramaturgia eului (Expresionismul)“, pp. 99-102.

In such a self-vision of the imagination, the individual is not an actual shape but a shadow, or, more correctly, the actual shape is invisibly present and therefore is not satisfied to cast one shadow, but the individual has a variety of shadows, all of which resemble him and which momentarily have equal status as being himself.¹⁷

Kierkegaard, by postulating not only the plurality of the individual and its desire for subjectivity, but also the necessity of the interlude, of the reiteration – that brings us to O'Neill's own elusiveness and breaks from life –, created an experimental landscape for the modern theatre in which the theatrical existence of the feminine, venturing from shadow to mask, from anxiety to despair (and even melancholia), occupies a determining position. The infinity of repetition and the interlude had an important impact on the dynamism and the temporality of the theatrical movement or on the specificities of modern life. Still, for O'Neill, femininity is disposed into an eternal form, a longlasting youthfulness, recollecting and repeating on stage one's wasted life, one's unhappiness and unsatisfaction.

Against lies. Nina Leeds and all women's truth

For Kierkegaard, the paradoxical significance of the woman, from a man's dream or a man's idea (referring to the role of imagination in his ethical development) to his ruin, depends almost entirely on relatedness: a self in relation to other selves, a feminine self-valued only in relation to a masculine other supposing that she is the one who attracts him into existence – the woman as substance and the man as reflection, the woman as lack of reflection and the man as spirit. However, the woman, an accidental and maybe underachieved character, is a master in lying leading to sexual corruption, trivial lust for life or ephemeral passion, cruelty, dissimulation in love and weakness, to mention only a few classifications of the feminine as noted in *Journals, Either/ Or* and especially in *The Seducer's Diary*:

¹⁷ S. Kierkegaard, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

The being of woman (the word *existence* says too much, for woman does not exist for herself) is correctly characterized as charm, a term which suggests the vegetative life; she is like a flower, as the poets like to say, and even the spiritual in her is present in a vegetative manner. She is wholly subject to nature, and hence only aesthetically free. In a deeper sense she first becomes free by her relation to man, and when man courts her properly, there can be no question of a choice.

Assuming that the woman becomes and is brought into existence (a-made-by-man-existence) in order to become a true self before God, Kierkegaard's writings offer different and contradictory viewpoints, the most illustrative for my topic being the femininity understood in a traditional (Christian) Western *Weltanschauung*. The Kierkegaardian womanliness comprises not only the abovementioned negative selves, all strange and complex, consistent and unmingled, but also sacrificial love, devotedness as a complementary self: being-for-other – companion, wife and mother –, although generally speaking the woman is not ontologically for-other (she is a lesser self, a “lower synthesis” for Anti-Climacus) and the man is not a being-for-self. For example, Judge William associates his life to the life of his woman, claiming that he is what he is through her and vice versa, that they both exist through and within their union (also sexual) and that his masculine authenticity lays in the fact that he is a married man. Similarly, every thought of Cordelia Wahl is thought through her lover. In this perspective, the love between a man and a woman should reside in a dialectical, universal and mutual identity because they are equal *before God*, that binds a middle term in their relationship. To this certain degree, a woman's life lies in her own possibility of performance and repetition – so how does she, through her *roles*, succeed or fail to become *a woman*?

This was also O'Neill's position in *Strange Interlude* (1928): Nina Leeds becomes a woman only at the end of the play when she marries the novelist Charles Marsden, the substitute of her dead father. Nina has in fact three men, yet she does not love any of them: her family friend Marsden, her husband Sam Evans, her lover, doctor Ned Darrell, even six if we consider her dead father, professor Henry Leeds and her young son Gordon, named

after her fiancé Gordon Shaw, who died in the war. All in all, she represents an original and monolithic womb, the place of the confluence of male desire and of the inevitable patriarchy:

My three men!... I feel their desires converge in me!... to form one complete beautiful male desire which I absorb... and am whole... they dissolve in me, their life is my life... I am pregnant with the three!... husband!... lover! . . . father!... and the fourth man!... little man!... little Gordon!... he is mine too!... that makes it perfect!... [...] Why, I should be the proudest woman on earth!... I should be the happiest woman in the world!...¹⁸

The play interrogates the impossibility of Nina's happiness, the inconsistency and the irrationality of her actions towards "the man". A narrative prefiguration of Mary Tyrone¹⁹ or a modulation of Anna Christie²⁰, Nina Leeds is always obsessed with the idea of both possessing and desiring, believing ambiguously and in an anti-Kierkegaardian manner that one should not think of others: she has lost everything in life so far and she has hurt everyone around – from now on, as her fictional sister Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, she is going to be happy until the end of her time, although she knows that's impossible. Although Nina discovers the feminine junction of pain and truth, the presence of another cannot guarantee authenticity in life or forgiveness. Her pray to God was never listened because God does not care about the trifling misery of *death-born-of-birth*. Subsequently, she couldn't believe in Him and she wouldn't even if she could. But life and lie – are they both equal to each other since woman and

¹⁸ The quotations in this chapter are from Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*, online edition, text as published in the trade edition by Boni and Liveright, 1928, <https://gutenberg.net.au>.

¹⁹ See the last chapter of this paper, "The Eternal Mourning: Mary Tyrone".

²⁰ From the play *Anna Christie*, 1920. Anna, a Viking-daughter and a former prostitute, showing all the outward evidences of belonging to the world's oldest profession, falls in love with Matt Burke, a man who survived a shipwreck, but she doesn't want to marry him since she cannot change her life ethically. Her secret, the truth about her past, is that she was raped while living with her mother's relatives. See also the film *Anna Christie* from 1930 directed by Clarence Brown with Greta Garbo and Charles Bickford, English-language version; or the German-language version from the same year directed by Jacques Feyder with Greta Garbo and Theo Shall.

truth represent the same thing for a man, for a husband? Is the man aware of the feminine truth and does he concede the suffering of a woman as being different from his own? Certainly, for Nina “Life is just a long drawn out lie with a sniffling sigh at the end!”, and extremely interesting, the li(f)e undoubtedly reflects the truth: she affirms that if one picks a lie to pieces, the pieces are the truth. There is a great incommensurability between the love of a woman and the love of a man towards her woman: their union is always unhappy; their sexual desire ends in an unbloody Strindbergian “battle of the brains” and it is hardly ever compared to a theatre of revolt. O’Neill assumes without exaggeration Strindberg’s beliefs that the woman does not love; the man is the one who loves and the woman is loved (in *Miss Julie* or *To Damascus* and also in his own relationship with Siri von Essen), the woman (a woman that hates in *The Stronger* or a woman from hell in *The Father*) represents the beginning and the end for a man, but in and by herself she is nothing. Not only nothing (meaning that she is everything), but also a scandalous intruder that disturbs and dominates emotionally the masculine universe/ power within her game of possession and self-possession (see Strindberg’s misogynist essay from 1880s that contributes to the birth of feminism – “Woman’s Inferiority to Man, and the Reasons for Her Subordinate Position”). Both Kierkegaard and Strindberg regarded the woman in a contradictory manner – not only with hatred/ misogyny, but also in glorification/ remembrance, associating her with the eternal.

With her prostitute eyes, which are unchangeably mysterious, Nina defines herself only in relation with men – virgin for Gordon, whore for the others – and lives forever, inside her heart, with the image of Gordon’s dead body, an original death that caused the never-ending dying of all men: “No, I’m not myself yet. That’s just it. Not all myself. But I’ve been becoming myself. And I must finish!” She invokes various feminine characters, from Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler, a femme fatale with a dreadfully boring life, to Ibsen’s Nora, (*The Doll’s House*), a woman who leaves her family in order to find herself; on the whole, she impersonates the Victorian “femme fatale”, Strindberg’s “castrating or destroying women”, Anne Whitefield from G. B.

Shaw's *Man and Superman* and even the instinctual "Life Force" (Arthur Schopenhauer's will)²¹. As a mother-wife figure, Nina questions her femininity and decides to have a baby not with her husband Sam, because of the insanity in his family, but with another man, the scientist Ned. In fact, her decision is sinister and catastrophic: she wanted to create a child from the image of her dead lover. This unobtainable quest prevented her from appropriating the other and brought once again to light the boundless distance between the matrix of maternity and her uncanny desire: at the end of the play, in relation to the masculine creation of her sorrowful maternal womb – her child Gordon –, the feminine self is unable to remain dominant, young and beautiful, but unchangingly mournful for her ghost lover Gordon, and forever searching for the unreachable. In one word, Nina fears losing what she could never have had. The motherhood transformed Nina into a yearning victim since her son was not actually her son, he was a surrogate of a descendant, taking notice of the symbolic pregnancy of a God-mother and, most importantly, of the impossibility of feminine transmission. Is God the Mother the hypostasis of a refreshed religion that overcomes the ineluctable fate (a future perspective without any men), another perversion of life or a masculine imperfection that could evoke the power of Gaia, the ancient earth god?

The mistake began when God was created in a male image. Of course, women would see Him that way, but men should have been gentlemen enough, remembering their mothers, to make God a woman! But the God of Gods – the Boss – has always been a man. That makes life so perverted, and death so unnatural. We should have imagined life as created in the birth-pain of God the Mother. Then we would understand why we, Her children, have inherited pain, for we would know that our life's rhythm beats from Her great heart, torn with the agony of love and birth. And we would feel that death meant reunion with Her, a passing back into Her substance, blood of Her blood again, peace of Her peace!" [a few pages forward] "There... again... his child!... my child moving in my life... my life moving in my child... the world is whole and perfect...

²¹ See James A. Robinson, chapter "The Middle Plays" in *Eugene O'Neill*, edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom, pp. 101-115.

all things are each other's... life is beyond reason... questions die in the silence of this peace... I am living a dream within the great dream of the tide... breathing in the tide I dream and breathe back my dream into the tide... suspended in the movement of the tide, I feel life move in me, suspended in me... no whys matter... there is no why... I am a mother... God is a Mother..." [a few pages forward:] "Me having a son was a failure, wasn't it? He couldn't give me happiness. Sons are always their fathers. They pass through the mother to become their father again. The Sons of the Father have all been failures! Failing they died for us, they flew away to other lives, they could not stay with us, they could not give us happiness!

At the same time, *Strange Interlude* is a play about the trauma of birth of a new race of women: a woman who is not forced, but freely renounces to her desire (there is no ideal life companion) and vitality (the loss of faith equals the loss of feeling), and, beyond any forgetfulness, she commits herself to an unresolvable mourning, the only possible truth of a dying life suggesting the struggle in her American conscience between the Western European marital values and the influence of New England Puritanism. Beyond desire, there is a tragic and unrepeatable form of a "death-in-life"²² pointing to an indefinable feminine trait (an "indefinable possession" in Kierkegaard's description), maybe to a restless feminine eternal of a Romantic inspiration (*das Ewig-Weibliche*, Germ., referring to the character of Margarete in Goethe's *Faust*) that exists over life and death and cannot be mingled with the masculine principle. In her theatrical strong presence, Nina's path reconfirms O'Neill's inclination for apotheosizing female representations in modern tragedy, the task of the feminine character in O'Neill's literary work being to represent a universal and hidden secret, evoking a few iconic feminine characters: Hedda Gabler, Ellida Wangel, Miss Julie, Antigone. On the other hand, Nina's transformation indirectly turns our attention to the Kierkegaardian metamorphosis of the woman as presented in *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, a metamorphosis that has no analogy in masculinity and that defines the real

²² Brenda Murphy, "O'Neill's America: the Strange Interlude Between the Wars" in *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill*, ed. by Michael Manheim, pp. 135-148.

beginning of her era, or, in Kierkegaard's own words (Inter et Inter actually), the idea of femininity *sensu eminentissimo*. According to Kierkegaard, it is not enough for a woman (an actress in this case) to have only feminine youthfulness, because feminine youthfulness in this sense is neither intrinsically dialectical, nor aesthetical. The second life, corresponding to the complete metamorphosis ("of potentiation"), the real expressiveness of the soul, requires time, an ideal and second time that makes the feminine genius more manifest and embodies an *ideality of recollection* that transilluminates the whole performance. In regard to Nina's life as a theatrical performance, the second time is represented by this strange interlude, a grievous episode, an in-between and unfinished time, or, as Charles Marsden puts it, a trial or a preparation, close to the purgatory, in which "our souls have been scraped clean of impure flesh and made worthy to bleach in peace". The interlude indicates not only the interval of the tragic and the nonsensical life surpassing the phenomenon of tragedy, but also the intermission of the modern play itself, revealing an architecture of interruptions, a breathing time for recollectedness and rehearsal. Kierkegaard suggests in *Crisis* that reflection goes hand in hand with the responsibility of how one lives, of a temporal consciousness; moreover, recollection and reflection are associated with a sort of dramatization, an actuality in drama. The interlude questions the timeliness of theatre from whose source the theatrical event flows in an unrepeatable manner. Instead, Nina speaks (in a voiceover technique, very relevant in theatre) about the impenetrable power of illusion, the undetermined mourning emphasized by the contrast between the God the Father – God the Mother:

The only living life is in the past and future... the present is an interlude... strange interlude in which we call on past and future to bear witness we are living!... (...) Yes, our lives are merely strange dark interludes in the electrical display of God the Father!

Lavinia/ Electra and Antigone. “The History of Truth”

In order to understand the modern tragic, its continuity throughout the aesthetic, the ethic and the religious, Kierkegaard writes the essay “The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama. A Venture in Fragmentary Endeavor” (1843) in which the modern Antigone is distinct from the ancient Antigone: she is not only proud of her (traumatic) secret, but she enjoys her sorrow – an objective sorrow – her melancholy. Whereas Antigone, the aesthete’s self-portrait, knows the secret of her father and, moreover, her knowing is her own anxiety, Oedipus does not know it. This is a new form of despair in the pre-Freudian²³ age: melancholy as a sadness without cause and despair as the affirmation of the self in ethico-religious categories. Kierkegaard redefines tragedy through the sufferance of every individual, more specifically, by reason of the intensity of the female suffering and reflection as the major source of anxiety:

I am using a female character because I believe that a female nature will be best suited to show the difference. As a woman, she will have enough substantiality for the sorrow to manifest itself, but as one belonging to a reflective world she will have sufficient reflection to experience the pain. In order for the sorrow to be experienced, the tragic guilt must vacillate between guilt and guiltlessness, and the vehicle by which guilt enters her consciousness must always be a qualification of substantiality.²⁴

Moreover, the essence of this new female character lies in the tomb of her own body in the way that her life occurs on an internal stage²⁵ and her

²³ For Sigmund Freud (*Trauer und Melancholie*, 1917) the correlation of mourning and melancholia is clinically sustainable: they both represent a reaction to loss, a normal versus a pathological one. Whereas mourning is a healthy reaction in the recovery, up to the point of the substitution of the beloved object, the melancholic remains sunken in his loss, in a self-destructive incorporation of the object to which his delirium points.

²⁴ S. Kierkegaard, “The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama. A Venture in Fragmentary Endeavor” in EO1 (*Either/ Or*, Part I), pp. 153-154.

²⁵ See *Ibidem*, p. 157: “Her life does not unfold like the Greek Antigone’s; it is turned inward, not outward. The stage is inside, not outside; it is a spiritual stage.”

guilt is ambiguous or inexistent, the chorus (the audience) of the *Symparanekromenoi* being indeed very suggestive – the members of this addressed imaginary society also live a buried life. As a consequence, the true (feminine) tragic in a modern tragedy (written by a man) reveals a dialectical exploration of the subjectivity caught between “freedom and fate, guilt and innocence, sorrow and pain, transparency and ambiguity”²⁶. Besides, as in the Hegelian analysis, modern tragedy adopts from the start the principle of subjectivity into its own sphere. In modern tragedy, preparing the steps for the absurdist drama, a woman’s life – depressed and desperate – has no epic background except for the horrible enigma of her parents or of her husband. *Mourning Becomes Electra* reveals the woman’s taste of murder and what it means for a feminine character to be hurt by her own phallic mother.

Mourning Becomes Electra (1929; three parts: *Homecoming*, *The Hunted*, *The Haunted*), patterned on the Oresteian myth, a drama of the hidden force behind life, represents the history of every modern (even Western European) family. Besides, the exploration of feminine subjectivity goes hand in hand with the history²⁷ of the feminine truth – for both Antigone and Lavinia (Electra), femininity has no resolution since they both belong to the living deads and their existence is between-two-deaths²⁸. The name of the father of this New England family at the end of the Civil War (1865), Agamemnon – Ezra Mannon, Mannon, suggestive of Man, of Man-non, A-Not-Man, reveals the struggle between life and death, but also an “unreal reality” that O’Neill wanted to create: a reality after murder and death, an impossible real as an unknown or unexplorable zone. All the women in this

²⁶ John A. Norris, “The Validity of A’s View of Tragedy with Particular Reference to Ibsen’s *Brand*”, in *International Kierkegaard Commentary Either/ Or*, Part I, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, p. 149.

²⁷ Orin, Lavinia’s brother, affirms in the third part of the tragedy, after killing his mother’s lover, the captain Adam Brant, that he will write the true history of all the family murders, beginning with the Grandfather’s one. The quotations in this chapter are from Eugene O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra*, online edition, <https://gutenberg.net.au>.

²⁸ See Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire VII. L’éthique de la psychanalyse*, 1959-1960.

play share not only a physical resemblance, but also an “inner psychic identity.”²⁹

First of all, they all look alike, pointing to the same feminine beauty ideal, as described by the playwright himself. The faces of Christine (40 years old; in the role of Clytemnestra) and Lavinia (23 years old) are described almost similarly: Christine is unusual, handsome rather than beautiful, one is “struck at once by the strange impression it gives in repose of being not living flesh but a wonderfully life-like pale mask, in which only the deep-set eyes, of a dark violet blue, are alive...”. With regard to Lavinia: “in spite of these dissimilarities, one is immediately struck by her facial resemblance to her mother. She has the same peculiar shade of copper-gold hair, the same pallor and dark violet-blue eyes, the black eyebrows meeting in a straight line above her nose, the same sensual mouth, the same heavy jaw. Above all, one is struck by the same strange, life-like mask impression her face gives in repose. But it is evident Lavinia does all in her power to emphasize the dissimilarity rather than the resemblance to her parent.” Christine tells her daughter that she was always present between her and her husband and also confesses that she could never accept that her daughter was born of any other body than Ezra’s. All in all, Lavinia, a half-woman and half-man character, like Strindberg’s Miss Julie, wanted to steal the place of her mother: to become the wife of his father and the mother of Orin (Orestes). Finally, she states she will not marry anyone due to the filial duty and also to the revelation of her mother’s guilt of prostitution. The *realization* of the modern tragedy reveals the protagonist Lavinia as a tragic mechanical doll, full of hatred and cruelty: mother and daughter as two brides of sorrow, victims of a murderer which resides in themselves – their own femininity that we can evaluate as a Freudian-Lacanian mutual mother-daughter relation. On this subject, Ingmar Bergman’s film from 1978, *Autumn Sonata/Höstsonaten*, follows the painful meeting between a famous classical pianist (Ingrid Bergman) and her neglected daughter (Liv Ullmann); while the

²⁹ See Doris Alexander, chap. “Mourning Becomes Electra” in *Eugene O’Neill*, edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom, pp. 31-58.

woman is a symptom for the man, she may be a *ravager* for her daughter. A woman wants subsistence, meaning love and identity, but as a mother she is unable to transmit anything that belongs to her and, all in all, femininity becomes a difficult and painful construction³⁰.

Secondly, these feminine “voluptuous figures”, moving with an “animal grace”, are described in contrast with the mortuary appearance of the Mannon house – a pagan temple or a threatening sepulcher with a Puritan mask, a sinful play between pleasure and life-denial where present has no future – “The temple portico is like an incongruous white mask fixed on the house to hide its somber gray ugliness.” It is set in isolation, in an excessive split with the neighbours. Every character of the Mannon house, male or female, even family portrait or corpse, has a sinister death mask, an evidence and a proof of lifelessness – the mask stands between characters, it separates them from themselves, it grows on their faces so that no one could guess their secrets and its removal is impossible.

In the third place, Vinnie’s conundrum implies to find out the truth of her femininity – which is actually turned inwardly not outwardly –, the perpetual mourning becomes her destiny: mourning becomes/ is Vinnie, the funeral position of this last Mannon. Following the ancient Antigone buried alive and true to her father’s belief that life represents dying beyond any metaphor, that being born is actually starting to die, Vinnie commits herself to a self-imprisonment, to a solitary and reflective sorrow, a self-immolation in the family temple and acts eventually according to the mask of the Mannons that erased their fundamental humanity when beginning the murders. Particularly relevant, she does not commit suicide like Strindberg’s Miss Julie or Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler. For Vinnie, to cohabit with the dead means that life and death become one and the same thing and time has no end – time has come to the deep night of the soul, its expressiveness. In

³⁰ See Jacques Lacan in *L’étourdit*, Staferla, p. 12: « À ce titre l’élucubration freudienne du complexe d’Œdipe, qui y fait la femme ‘poisson dans l’eau’, de ce que la castration soit chez elle de départ – Freud dicit –, contraste douloureusement avec le fait du ravage qu’est chez la femme – pour la plupart – le rapport à sa mère, d’où elle semble bien attendre, comme femme, plus de subsistance que de son père – ce qui ne va pas avec lui, étant second dans ce ravage. »

Kierkegaard's interpretation, the hero's downfall is not only a result of his action but also a suffering; the modern tragic hero is subjectively reflected in himself, that's why modern tragedy has no epic foreground:

The tragic hero is subjectively reflected in himself, and this reflection has not only reflected him out of every immediate relation to state, kindred, and fate but often has even reflected him out of his own past life. What concerns us is a certain specific element of his life as his own deed. For this reason, the tragic can be exhausted in situation and lines because no immediacy is left at all. Therefore, modern tragedy has no epic foreground, no epic remainder. The hero stands and falls entirely on his own deeds.³¹

The feminine character experiences the impossibility of change beyond the personal action due to a generic guilt without sin, as we have stated in the first chapter of this paper. At the end of the play, Lavinia, "the most interesting criminal of us all" (in Orin's unpardonable description), entombs herself in the death temple, similar to the Greek house of Atreus, in order to suffer with her own sufferance – an elegy of the immemorial –, although she now represents a kind of re-embodiment of her dead mother and the embodiment of her loss. And with her evanescence, the end of a generation and of the feminine transmission, maybe the end of her race and consequently of the hereditary sin, which, in Kierkegaard's view, has its own *history*³²:

I'm not going the way Mother and Orin went. That's escaping punishment. And there's no one left to punish me. I'm the last Mannon. I've got to punish myself! Living alone here with the dead is a worse act of justice than death or prison! I'll never go out or

³¹ S. Kierkegaard, "The Tragic in Ancient Drama...", *op. cit.*, pp. 143-144.

³² S. Kierkegaard, CA (*The Concept of Anxiety. Kierkegaard's Writings VIII*), p. 29 & pp. 33-34: "As the history of the race moves on, the individual begins constantly anew, because he is both himself and the race, and by this, in turn, the history of the race. (...) Since the race does not begin anew with every individual, the sinfulness of the race does indeed acquire a history. Meanwhile, this proceeds in quantitative determinations while the individual participates in it by the qualitative leap. For this reason the race does not begin anew with every individual, in which case there would be no race at all, but every individual begins anew with the race."

see anyone! I'll have the shutters nailed closed so no sunlight can ever get in. I'll live alone with the dead, and keep their secrets, and let them hound me, until the curse is paid out and the last Mannon is let die! (with a strange cruel smile of gloating over the years of self-torture) I know they will see to it I live for a long time! It takes the Mannons to punish themselves for being born!

The Eternal Mourning: Mary Tyrone

The night of the feminine soul in the case of Mary Tyrone (*Long Day's Journey into Night*, 1940) appears within the sickness of the body: the morphine addiction in order to diminish the pain of the birth labor in the beginning, the pain of her hands afterwards. Every evening, with her eyes brighter and full of tears, Mary Tyrone suffers a nervous breakdown; she begins a desperate battle with herself as she slips into a foggy and terrifying zone with her cataract eyes where her two sons Jamie and Edmund and her husband James have no access to her. At the same time, O'Neill writes that her facial expression shows an uncanny detachment or aloofness which seems to stand apart from her nerves or from the anxieties which harry the other members of her family. That's what Mary confesses in a very Kierkegaardian note:

But how can you understand, when I don't myself. I've never understood anything about it, except that one day long ago I found I could no longer call my soul my own. But some day, I will find it again – some day when you're all well, and I see you healthy and happy and successful, and I don't have to feel guilty anymore – some day when the Blessed Virgin Mary forgives me and gives me back the faith in Her love and pity I used to have in my convent days...³³

Taking in mind his Irish Catholic background, O'Neill insists on the aspect of the feminine creation with respect to the Immaculate Conception. The domestic tragedy *Long Day's Journey* was written in blood and tears, in

³³ The quotations in this chapter are from Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, online edition, <https://gutenberg.net.au>.

an organic fusion with the traumatic events of Gene's life: his father, the actor James O'Neill died in August 1920; his mother, Mary Ellen Quinlan (Ella), a graduate of a convent academy in Indiana, 13 years younger than her husband, died two years later from a brain tumour; the next year, his brother Jamie, an alcoholic, died at the age of 45. The mourning and the grief lasted two decades and determined Eugene to dramatize and even to unmask the tragedy of this multiple loss in *Long Day's Journey*: "After 1920, nearly every O'Neill play is either directly or indirectly about death, loss and mourning, and most have bereaved characters (such as Eben Cabot in *Desire Under the Elms*³⁴ or Nina Leeds in *Strange Interlude*) who struggle unsuccessfully to let their dead be dead and to live their own lives without feeling haunted."³⁵ Dedicating the manuscript to his wife, he admitted that he had faced his death "at last" and he had regarded the departed "with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness", getting so close to the Freudian theory of mourning. Just like Strindberg, Gene was an unwanted child, a misbegotten (see the play from 1942, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*). He realized that his entrance into this world – similar to the birth of Edmund in *Long Day's Journey*, who became a self-destructive individual – was the cause for his mother's morphine addiction: a shameful feminine secret, anxiety, hurting memories, depression, pain, noonday demons, alienation and repression. Like Ella, Mary Tyrone was a fragile mother who succumbed to daily reverie and anorexic symptoms in the illusory peace of her mingled thoughts and for whom the past was both present and future, so she sadly recognizes that "We cannot help what life has done to us", "We all try to lie out of that but life won't let us". Her need to conquer the time – apart from the timeless loss – is almost absent if one considers that the woman, in her deep anxiety and sorrow, has no history – the essence of her feminine pain is unhistorical: "It kills the pain [about the drug]. You go back until at last you are beyond its reach. Only the past when you were happy is real". What has

³⁴ A tragedy from 1924. For Eben, a dark-eyed man with a repressed fury, every day is like a cage. He prays his father Ephraim was dead since he is the virtual killer of the mother.

³⁵ Stephen A. Black, « "Celebrant of loss": Eugene O'Neill 1888-1953 », in *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill*, ed. by Michael Manheim, p. 5.

Mary Tyrone done with her life? Why does she tell her husband that they represent objects instead of subjects? Her feeling of nothingness is revealed through her moments of physical presence, but psychic absence – “It was never a home... And for me it’s always been as lonely as a dirty room in a one-night stand hotel. In a real home one is never lonely. You forget I know from experience what a home IS like. I gave up one to marry you – my father’s home.” Indeed, Mary’s despair comes out from an inner loneliness, from the fact that she has lost her true self forever; this was also Kierkegaard’s position in *The Sickness Unto Death* or in *The Concept of Anxiety*. For Kierkegaard, feminine despair is despair in weakness, despair not to will to be oneself, whereas masculine despair is despair in defiance, despair to will to be oneself; of course, there are women who manifest masculine despair and vice versa. Mary could have become herself if she had given herself to the family members and her lack of self-assertion explains the spirit in dreaming with her eyes wide open; to put it differently, the woman is nature’s innocent. This woman’s dream of spirituality and purity – to be a concert pianist or a nun – together with her imaginary escapes from reality are not enough to make her hide from herself even in her moments of self-revelation. Certainly, Mary Tyrone, like Nina Leeds, is a living dead who prematurely began the mourning for her not-ended-life or for the life she could have had, since the memorable is associated only with the most painful. Such psychoanalytic insight into the feminine psyche was never encountered before in an American drama/ tragedy. Although she is still searching for her own story, Mary is caught into the logic of the impossible salvation. Moreover, her miserable curse was the wedding dress and the birth of her three sons (of which Eugene died at 7 because of measles), the procreation which seems to suspend not only the spirit, but also the Kierkegaardian reflection. At the same time, if a woman culminates in procreation, she is more sensuous. Kierkegaard states very originally that although woman is the weaker sex, the anxiety belongs to her more than to man³⁶ and that this anxiety should be conceived in the direction of freedom

³⁶ See S. Kierkegaard, CA (*The Concept of Anxiety. Kierkegaard’s Writings VIII*), pp.: 47, 64, 72 etc.

and should not be a sign of imperfection – in other words, “the greatness of anxiety is a prophecy of the greatness of the perfection”. For Mary Tyrone, the moment of giving birth to Edmund, doubled by a lonely scream in despair, was the beginning of her extreme anxiety and of her everlasting punishment which transforms her into a *mater dolorosa*, the self-invoked incorporation of Virgin Mary: “I knew something terrible would happen.” And the narcotic escape, as a pseudo-idyllic reclusion or the hypostasis of sin and temptation, contributes to the irreversible transformation of this fallen woman who is often named “a ghost” or even “Ophelia” by the Tyrones... it contributes also to the history³⁷ of her unmanageable unhappiness exposed in a failed confession right at the end of the play that hopes to rebuild the ideal times:

I had a talk with Mother Elizabeth. She is so sweet and good. A saint on the earth. I love her dearly. It may be sinful of me but I love her better than my own mother (...) I told her I wanted to be a nun (...) But Mother Elizabeth told me I must be surer than that, even; that I must prove it wasn't simply my imagination I said, of course, I would do anything she suggested, but I knew it was simply a waste of time. After I left her, I felt all mixed up, so I went to the shrine and prayed to the Blessed Virgin and found peace again because I knew she heard my prayer and would always love me and see no harm ever came to me as long as I never lost my faith in her (...) That was in the winter of senior year. Then in the spring something happened to me. Yes, I remember. I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so happy for a time.

³⁷ In his reading of Freud, Lacan writes about a metonymic displacement in the body concerning the couple history – hysteria (Fr. *hystérie* – *hystorisation*). The body of the hysterical represents a dream that has to be interpreted because it speaks about the eretical history of the subject: « Alors ceci nous amène à considérer que l'hystérique dont chacun sait qu'il est aussi bien mâle que femelle, l'hystorique... si je me permets ce glissement, il faut considérer en somme qu'elle n'est... je la féminise pour l'occasion, mais comme vous allez voir que je vais y mettre de l'autre côté mon poids, ça me suffira largement à vous démontrer que je ne pense pas qu'il n'y ait des hystériques que féminines... l'hystorique n'a en somme – pour la faire consister – qu'un inconscient, c'est la radicalement Autre. Elle n'est même qu'en tant qu'Autre. » (*Séminaire XXIV. L'insu que sait de l'une-bévue s'aile à mourre, 1976-1977, Staferla, online, p. 11*)

Conclusion: The Feminine Rejection of the Theatre

Kierkegaard's theatrical views, thoughts, literary traces and hypotheses represent a major source of inspiration not only for the Nordic cultural environment, but also for the European and non-European modern playwrights, and even for the theatre, cinema or modern drama theory in the last two centuries; the category of repetition on the stage fractures the traditional dramaturgical limits and establishes a new and unrepeatable memory of the theatrical event, emerging from the performative power of the interlude, of the stage confession and of the passage between acts. Although the modern Antigone is fully reflective, Johannes (from *The Diary of a Seducer*) considered that the woman in general can never become a truly self-conscious self (a complete ethical individual) since the feminine selves are not entities at all: they belong to nature (biology?) and they are *free* only *aesthetically*. But Kierkegaard's theatrical focus on both dramaturgy and dramatization, also his mention of the feminine secret, articulate a phenomenology of the theatrical image (as stated in my introduction) and perhaps an archaeology of the theatrical repeated sin of the modern Antigone. Theatrical repetition outlines a considerable gap between reality and desire, revelation and counter revelation in the O'Neill's plays of his realistic period, especially in *Long Day's Journey*, a dramatized autobiography in which the feminine character is framed by the psychic symptoms of each family member. One woman surrounded by three men on a panoptical stage of anxiety³⁸, Mary Tyrone, an ill mother-wife figure and at the same time a paradoxical *everywoman*, remains forever at home in order to maintain, at least on her other ideal stage, her femininity and chastity. In contrast to her husband the ruined actor James Tyrone for whom the house is a kind of a world's stage, the only stage where he can truly be an actor, Mary argues against the instance of theatre, associating her objection to the symbol of evil, atrocity or impurity. She never felt at home in the theatre when her husband was rehearsing his roles,

³⁸ This was masterfully captured by Sidney Lumet (and his excellent cinematographer Boris Kaufman) in his cinematic adaptation from 1962 (174 mins.) with Katharine Hepburn, Ralph Richardson, Jason Robards and Dean Stockwell.

she had little to do with the people in his company or with anyone on the stage; moreover, the life of the theatre was never her life and, essentially, theatre always stood between her and her husband, obstructing her deep access to him – theatre as prison that separates two incongruent and discordant persons. In other words, theatre divided in isolated cells, where each mask or actor/ actress is alone.

CATHLEEN: Speaking of acting, Ma'am, how is it you never went on the stage?

MARY: [*resentfully*] I? What put that absurd notion in your head? I was brought up in a respectable home and educated in the best convent in the Middle West. Before I met Mr. Tyrone I hardly knew there was such a thing as a theatre. I was a very pious girl. I even dreamed of becoming a nun. I've never had the slightest desire to be an actress.

In fact, Mary's resentment of the stage reveals her serious objection to drama and melodrama as a potential exploration of any other point of view: there is only one point of view, unique and exceptional – her personal pain that encloses a personal truth, an offstage metatheatre allowing a single view, a single gaze. In this context, Mary's wedding dress signifies a second skin full of lies, some tragic and miserable marriage stories, a double veil of an irrepressible disaster. However, her position at the end of the play is as theatrical as possible, alluding to the central episode in Kierkegaard's *Repetition*, where Constantin Constantius goes to the theatre – to this spot of artificial actuality and untruthfulness – in order to repeat a memorable experience, *i.e.* the unrepeatable. As already pointed, Mary tries to create a genuine image of herself in a theatrical self-reflection and in an exteriorization of her inner life. Theatricality and spectacle (a new kind of performance?) emerge from this uncovering monologue as an impossible return to her "dear old self", a neverending quest of the soul on a foggy arena, in a latent state of cyclical mourning; everything as in a transcendent poem written by Hart Crane, Gene's favourite poet:

The window weight throbs in its blind
 partition. To extinguish what I have of faith.
 Yes, light. And it is always
 Always, always the eternal rainbow
 And it is always the day,
 the farewell day unkind. (from *The Visible, The Untrue*)

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- [I: În drum spre Cardiff, Înaintea gustării de dimineață, Ulei, Luna Caraibilor, Dincolo de zare, Anna Christie, Toți copiii lui Dumnezeu au aripă, Patima de sub ulmi, Marco Milionul.
- II: Straniul interludiu, Din jale se-ntrupează Electra.
- III: Tinerete, bat-o vina!..., Fire de poet, Lungul drum al zilei către noapte, Luna pentru cei dezmoșteniți.]
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Stairways to Heaven: Klimakos and Climacus

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*There are things we can only vaguely understand, and should be content with that;
unfortunately we try to understand them thoroughly, only to find out that
we no longer understand them. Behind every book there is a man.*

Lucian Blaga (1895-1961)

Transylvanian poet and philosopher

Abstract. “Stairways to Heaven: Klimakos and Climacus” is an investigation of an unusual instance in Kierkegaard’s use of names, an attempt to explain the fact that Kierkegaard, whose pseudonyms – generally speaking – cannot be linked to “real” people, made one exception, when he adopted the name Johannes Climacus, the Latin version of the Greek Ioannes Klimakos; and built a bridge between Klimakos – a historical Sinaite hermit (579-649) from Egypt – and his preferred pseudonym, Johannes Climacus – an anti-system Copenhagen student, poet, humorist. I believe that the author’s choice of his Climacus pseudonym, his use of the allegory of the mystical ladder to paradise, might be the result not only of historical facts and events contemporary to Kierkegaard, the prompting of providence, but also of a subtle mythical radiation that Kierkegaard was exposed to; that he was influenced by an unseen corpus of archetypes, religious and mythological motifs related to the idea of the purification of the soul through the body, and to that of a symbolic ladder of spiritual ascent, built in order to “facilitate the gods’ descent to earth, or ensure the ascent of the dead man’s soul”.

Keywords: Klimakos, Climacus, desert and urban asceticism, monasticism, myths, archetypes.

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Introduction. Pseudonyms and Kierkegaard's pseudonymity

I admit to having chosen this topic despite several – undoubtedly well-intentioned – warnings that Kierkegaard's pseudonyms must not be confused, or compared, with the actual figures in history, mythology or world literature that he borrowed them from. Keeping this in mind, I shall cautiously endeavour to discover some reasons for, and implications of, Kierkegaard's Climacus/Klimakos model (The relationship between Kierkegaard and his pseudonym Climacus will be given less emphasis). To explain why Kierkegaard chose this alias, I will try to identify the extent of his knowledge of Klimakos's life and work, but refrain, as much as possible, from conducting a parallel biographical examination of Kierkegaard's life – an approach that has been employed abundantly in much recent Kierkegaard investigation. Understandably so, since, as Hemingway once noted, it is so much easier to talk about a classic than to read it. To avoid the perils of that path, I intend to approach the Climacus/Klimakos "monastic issue" by relying on examples extracted from Kierkegaard's work (not his life), especially from his pseudonymous classic *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Regarding Kierkegaard's pseudonyms Aage Henriksen notes:

Anyone who writes about Søren Kierkegaard will eventually come to reveal his opinion about the significance of his pseudonymity. If critics fail to address it in the introductions to their books, their interpretations will nevertheless emerge from the manner in which they present his life and thoughts. As we know, Kierkegaard himself asserted that any reader who traced all his writings back to him would inevitably gain 'a distorted impression of the pseudonymous books'.¹

The quotation is from the book *Kierkegaard's Novels*. A book that caused an outcry when it was published in 1960s Denmark, and naturally so. How dreary to call Kierkegaard (who quite liked calling himself "a poet" of Christianity) something as commonplace as "a novelist". In the same spirit,

¹ Aage Henriksen, *Kierkegaards Romaner*, Gyldendal, 1969, p. 7.

NB: Danish-English translations are (unless otherwise stated) mine.

I am taking this opportunity to warn the reader that he or she is liable to encounter, in the following, ideas, examples and quotes that are sometimes chosen for their symbolic and literary qualities, rather than for being great philosophical, theological, Kierkegaardian “truths”.

Pseudonyms were used long before and after Kierkegaard by authors who, for personal reasons, preferred to remain anonymous. Some were reluctant to divulge their names, some wanted a new name because they intended to deviate from their usual style or topic and needed a new mask; some might have simply wanted to avoid persecution, adopt a new stance or gender, develop a different style of writing, life etc, without having to be responsible for the consequences of their work. We know of authors who went under a single pen name (Marie-Henri Beyle became Stendhal, Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg became Novalis), others under two names (Karen Blixen also published as Isak Dinesen, Eric Arthur Blair as George Orwell etc). Had Blair, for instance, chosen to sign himself Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas or Thomas Becket, it would undoubtedly have caused some commotion. John Climacus’s signature did not.

Kierkegaard, as is his wont, takes poetic liberties when building up a character such as Climacus, a *nom de guerre* that, at least in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, expresses one of Kierkegaard’s existential positions: his interest in, and attraction towards, monasticism that renounces the flesh in the hope of climbing an almost Dantesque “golden ladder rising dizzily to the last celestial sphere”.²

Kierkegaard’s genius (to paraphrase Aristotle) is here commensurate with his power to make good metaphors. His symbolic ladder to paradise could be one.

While Johannes Climacus is undoubtedly a fictional figure, well-known to Kierkegaard readers, Ioannes Klimakos, his largely ignored counterpart and prototype, is not. It is unlikely that Kierkegaard decided on his favourite pseudonym at random, without pre-knowledge of Klimakos’s life and book, or without a feeling of empathy towards the Sinaite’s noviciate.

² Dante, Alighieri, *Paradiso. Canto XXII*, line 67, tr. by Henry F. Cary.

Works signed Johannes Climacus triggered little disquiet in Kierkegaard's time. No objection was made on the grounds that Kierkegaard's Climacus, on the one hand, and Sinaite Ioannes tes Klimakos, on the other, were in several ways as different from each other as Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. The Klimakos/Climacus distinction didn't create a stir and didn't seem to worth a raised eyebrow, a footnote, or a short article. Besides, the general custom of re-baptising and naturalising saints and monks, so that Klimakos is also known as Johannes Climacus in Danish, John of the Ladder in English, Giovanni Climaco in Italian, Saint Jean Climaque in French, Ioan Scărarul in Romanian, John of Sinai, John Scolasticus etc, can make it difficult for the unwary reader to recognise the connection between a local saint or martyr and his original: in this case the author of *Klimax tou Paradeisou*, that is, *Scala Paradisi* or *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. This state of affairs calls, I believe, for a closer look at our Klimakos/Climacus pair, yet without losing our path in the intricate network of Eastern monastic tradition and Klimakos's general status and reception in the world. We hope nevertheless that a short investigation of hesychast Klimakos's life, noviciate and book will further the scope of this comparative article. We apologise to those already familiar with them for the following brief introduction to Klimakos's life and deeds.

What's in a name? Klimakos, to begin with, is *not* the "real" name of our Sinaite monk, but the pseudonym given to him at the age of twenty. His birthplace and name remain unknown. To ease a potential, and understandable, confusion of names and characters, we take advantage of the fact that our Sinaite hermit's pseudonym seems to be the only one spelled with a "K" (Klimakos); Kierkegaard's philosophy student's, as well as the other non-Greek aliases mentioned above, are spelled with a "C" (Climacus). The "original" Klimakos, the historical Syrian/Palestinian novice, dedicated his life to ceaseless worship of God from the age of sixteen; a suitable age, as it was recommended that novices started their spiritual practice before becoming attached to earthly pleasures. Monastic recruitment policy is based on the idea that the attraction of a hard programme of self-discipline is

usually stronger in one's prime than in maturity. Klimakos is mentioned in annals, perhaps for the first time, on his joining St Catherine's – a Greek Orthodox monastery of the Byzantine tradition, founded in 527 by the Byzantine emperor Justinian at Mount Sinai, Egypt. At the age of twenty he was allegedly given – by second baptism – the name Klimakos, the Greek for "ladder", together with a new tonsure, by his spiritual guide, Abba Martyrius. This was probably the age when the novice decided to seek peace away from other people, leave – after six cenobitic years – St Catherine's and move six miles away to the Thola hermitage, where he lived in anchoritic isolation for the next forty years. He later returned to his cenobitic existence, became an abbot, and wrote his aforementioned book – in Greek, that being the dominant language of the ecclesiastical culture in the monasteries of Egypt and Palestine at that time, as both lands were part of the emperor Constantine's Christian Byzantine Empire.

Section One below is an attempt to find evidence of Kierkegaard's interest in the aforementioned Klimakos and his allegorical *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, and to show that Kierkegaard was inspired by this historical person, whom he chose as an example, and later adapted to his own reality. *Section Two* is an account based on Kierkegaard's texts, consisting of a number of extracts from his pseudonymous authorship, quoted sections that reflect Climacus's interest and involvement in monasticism, and his attitude towards it. *Section Three* abandons the somewhat restricted historical-biographical background and the idea of a, say, concrete "physical" relationship between monasticism, Climacus, his works and the historical reality. It addresses a shift of horizon to a realm somehow more universal than the historical-biographical.

Section One

By assigning to a quaint John Climacus the role of author of a number of his pseudonymous works, Kierkegaard brings in an unfamiliar, perhaps little-known, name on the Danish cultural scene. Not entirely a new or surprising gesture from Kierkegaard, who was hardly a partisan and follower of “popular” contemporary philosophical religious trends. Kierkegaard, with his avant-garde use of pseudonyms, opposed German and Danish Hegelianism, disapproved of blind discipleship of popular, successful authors (writers, philosophers, theologians, priests), fashionable literary and philosophical coteries, membership of “Academic Reading Associations” and the like. His own plethora of “heroes” consist often of thinkers he discovered for himself, such as Socrates, Plato, Lessing, Hamann and Trendelenburg, who, as used by Kierkegaard, become his (and his readers’) contemporaries. Not to forget Kierkegaard’s unusual aptitude for recalling and reinterpreting mythical and Biblical figures such as Agamemnon, Iphigenia, Antigone, Job, Abraham, Jesus and Isaac. He extends the borders of Christianity to the Gaza and Sinai deserts and to hermits and introduces an often ignored and neglected form of thinking. He takes saints down from what Robert St Clair calls the “livid light of the stained glass window”, walks and talks with philosophers in his room and in the Copenhagen *agora*, dusts off volumes of forgotten lore, gives life to dead thinkers and martyrs, transforming them into living figures and relevant contemporaries. Kierkegaard makes old issues seem fresh. Likewise, he chooses a less known, neutral, religious figure, like that of Klimakos, introducing his instructions for the ascent to spiritual perfection (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*).

In the words of John Chryssavgis, “First, the *Ladder* was written specifically for monks in a *cenobium*. And second, the work is relevant to lay people too; the *Ladder* has indeed over centuries influenced many monks and married people alike [...] In the spiritual life, there is no sharp distinction

between monastics and non-monastics: the monastic life is simply the Christian life, lived in a particular way.”³

Kierkegaard adapts their main message to make it “modern” and relevant, to bring passion to his contemporary reality. This encourages us to assume that his choice of the Climacus pseudonym – be he proselyte of an “A” or “B” religiousness, or a non-religious, be he Christian or not quite Christian – was not a fortuitous act. This does not, however, entail that Kierkegaard’s knowledge of Klimakos and the ladder motif relied more than instinctively on a thorough knowledge and understanding of it. It has been said more than once, and in more than one way, that with Kierkegaard, we must be aware that “Climacus is nothing more than a fictional figure, to whom we can ascribe no more than what he himself says, we cannot surmise, as he jokingly suggests, that he might really be a Christian and his own jokiness just a facade.”⁴ As Michelle Stott points out, “At no point in either the published works or the collected papers does Kierkegaard demonstrate the slightest concern for a factual, scientific background to any person or figure with whom he is concerned.”⁵

Notwithstanding the scepticism shown in the above quotes with regard to Klimakos’s significance, we will have recourse to Danish philosopher Gregor Malantschuk’s different, perhaps “friendlier”, assessment:

[...] why would Kierkegaard choose Climacus as the main pseudonym for major parts of his authorship? The explanation is, undoubtedly, that Kierkegaard was inspired by the guidance on Christian ethics offered by this sixth century monk, Johannes Climacus. His work *Scala Paradisi*, which has been consulted for centuries, provides instructions on how any human being who wants to obey God’s Commandments must practise, step by step,

³ John Chrysavgis, *John Climacus; From the Egyptian Desert to the Sinaite Mountain*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, London & New York, 2018, p. 23.

⁴ Alastair Hannay, *Johannes Climacus’ revocation*, in: *Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript, A Critical Guide*, CUP 2010, ed. by R. A. Furtak, p. 59.

⁵ Michelle Stott, *Behind the Mask; Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymic Treatment of Lessing in the Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Lewisburg, Bucknell U.P. 1993, p. 22.

Christian religious virtues in his aspiration to perfection. Climacus's experiences were actually those of a monk and Kierkegaard himself became a Victor Eremita after the publication of *Either-Or*.⁶

Persuaded to look for palpable “physical evidence” that Kierkegaard had knowledge of the historical Klimakos and his book, we might be surprised initially by the absence of a copy of *The Ladder to Paradise* from the shelves of Kierkegaard's library; especially since the book was translated into Latin as early as the eleventh century, into Spanish in 1532, and into German in 1834. Fortunately, it turns out that Kierkegaard *was* familiar with the work. According to Malantschuk, Kierkegaard mentions Climacus in his Papers (Pap. II A 335) as early as January 20, 1839.⁷ Kierkegaard “must have had” knowledge of Climacus from the theology thesis of his brother, Peter Christian Kierkegaard. The latter refers to a book by Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette (1780-1849), in which Climacus's name figures. De Wette's book, translated into Danish in 1835 as *Lærebog i den christelige Sædelære og sammes Historie*, can be found in Kierkegaard's personal library as item #871. Reasonable proof, we hope, that Kierkegaard had at least secondhand information about Klimakos, Egyptian monasticism and its growing sphere of influence, “as it spread to Palestine and Syria, reached Cappadocia, Greece and the West”.⁸ As for his Climacus, we can mention that Kierkegaard endows him with a bent for literature, as well: Jon Stewart claims “it is less known that Kierkegaard planned a work entitled *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est*, in which he intended to treat a number of philosophical themes in a literary fashion.”⁹

Alert readers will intuit that a literary philosophical Climacus – immersed in theoretical questioning about whether all philosophy starts with

⁶ Gregor Malantschuk, *Fra Individ til den Enkelte*, Reitzel, Copenhagen, 1978, p. 45.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10 (Footnote 5).

⁸ Jacques Lacarrière, *The God-Possessed*, G. Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1961, tr. by Roy Monkom, p. 8.

⁹ Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, CUP, Cambridge, 2003, p. 238.

doubt – would probably be taken aback at Klimakos’s description of the radical Eastern Orthodox practices of “fasts, mortification, staying motionless in the dark or cooped up in a confined space, chains, wounds.”¹⁰ It is improbable that Kierkegaard’s Hafnian student would consider a path of spiritual ascent, based on methods so rigorous and so much beyond his aptitudes, nature or curiosity. Copenhagen Climacus will perhaps, and more likely, adapt his piety to a cooler and homelier landscape, a home retreat, a “city secluded life”. He doesn’t actually have to forsake the “normal” world; he can, instead, conquer the world of his independent interiority. He becomes an urban yogi, whose business was (as T. S. Eliot fittingly characterises Baudelaire’s Christianity), “not to practice Christianity, but – what was much more important for his time – to assert its necessity.”¹¹

Like the Luthers and Savonarolas before him, Climacus abandons the idea of the desert cell of Sinaite monasticism, of “being dead to the world”, or Klimakos’s refuge. He chooses to be a victorious city hermit. The Luthers’ and Savonarolas’ “intellectual and urban askesis is the stepping stone from the hermitages of quiet valleys to the scholar’s study of the Baroque. The mystic experience of Luther is [...] not of a St. Bernard in the presence of woods and hills and clouds and stars, but of a man who looks through narrow windows on the streets and house walls and gables.”¹²

For Climacus (and Kierkegaard) thought can (ought to?) exist apart from action, since it is “perfectly fitting and expedient clearly to think certain things which it is neither fitting nor expedient to ‘spoil by action’”.¹³ Instead of dying from the world and living in a hermitage or cell, Climacus comes to the Pascalian conclusion that most of our misery has come from not being able to remain alone in our rooms.

¹⁰ Lacarrière. *op. cit.*, p. 210.

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, “Baudelaire”, in *Selected Prose*, Penguin Books, 1953, p. 187.

¹² Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of The West*, Vintage Books, New York, 2006, tr. by C. F. Atkinson, p. 338.

¹³ Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose 1909-1965*, Faber and Faber, London, 1973, p. 391.

Section Two

Our question was why does Kierkegaard give the authors of *Philosophical Fragments*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and *Johannes Climacus* or *De Omnibus dubitandum est* a name that “obliges” Climacus (and some of us) to connect and compare him with his celebrated forerunner? Especially when Kierkegaard had a series of non-committal Latin and Danish pseudonyms – such as *N. Notabene*, *Afham*, *C. Constantius* – at hand. Kierkegaard’s inability to answer this question deprives us of the chance to hear his definitive opinion and forces us again to decide alone. J. P. Sartre, the existentialist thinker significantly closer to our time than Kierkegaard, claims that the disadvantage of being a dead author is that his is “a ‘dead life’ [...] that can never again be modified from the inside (by the person who had lived it), but [...] whose meaning is henceforth constantly modified from the outside (by the living). [...] The living henceforth decides on the meaning of the lives of the millions of dead – both the ‘preserved’ and the ‘forgotten’”.¹⁴

As we intend to search for and modify Kierkegaard’s meaning, we will have to leave him, and concentrate solely on the character and authorship of his pseudonym, without being “tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions.” In ordinary culture, “the explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it.”¹⁵

An example of an early Danish critic who failed to move away from the author, paying minute, almost Freudian, attention to Kierkegaard’s biography, his family, contemporaries, critics and characters (the Kierkegaard/Climacus relationship as well), is Georg Brandes, who asserted as early as 1877 that Kierkegaard “believed only in two possibilities: hedonism or asceticism, a life of enjoyment or of renunciation; both forms of life grew in front of his eyes to such power that they repressed and killed any intermediate form of natural and human existence [...] monastic longing

¹⁴ Andrew Leak, *Jean Paul Sartre*, Reaktion Books Ltd, London, 2006, p. 149.

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, Fontana/Collins, Glasgow, 1997, tr. by Stephen Heath, p. 143.

for woman as forbidden fruit and the monk's hatred of woman, the unclean being, her debasing touch."¹⁶ This characterisation can give the reader a (possibly first) clue to Kierkegaard's constant Pascalian vacillation between being an ascetic Klimakos, seeking a perfect union with God, among men of the world; and on the other hand being a cigar-smoking Climacus, a regular visitor to Copenhagen's Deer Park, yet still feeling a spiritual connection with hermits and monks. This longing for something that everyday life could not give him, the urge to renounce familial and social relationships, is expressed by Kierkegaard in this way: "I had to exist and protect an existence in absolute isolation, while at the same time making sure that I would be seen in the street; to live – so to say – in the street, in the company of Tom, Dick and Harry and in the most unexpected situations."¹⁷

This is an isolation often disapproved of by generations of later existentialists who, shackled to the realities of the city, opted for an active life in the world and shunned, from time to time, the religious stage altogether. Danish writer Olaf Pedersen commented that, with Kierkegaard, "it would be wrong to confound the emergence of the individual with monastic life, or with a refined individual life; one could, on the contrary, be religious and still take a Sunday outing in the Deer Park. The Knight of Faith will always present himself without disguise, without any trace of mystique or romance. He renounces common life – and receives it again from God's hand."¹⁸

There is, for good reason, general speculation about the "real" standing and religiousness of Kierkegaard, Climacus and Anti-Climacus, and whether we can identify anywhere the idea of a clean-cut difference between an A religiousness – Socratic, pagan, immanent (dying from the world) – on the one hand, and a B religiousness – an Abrahamic monotheistic,

¹⁶ Georg Brandes, *Søren Kierkegaard, En Kritisk Fremstilling i Grundrids*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen, 1877, p. 155.

¹⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Synspunktet for min Forfattervirksomhed*, Hans Reitzels Serie, Copenhagen, 1963, p. 79.

¹⁸ Olaf Pedersen, *Fra Kierkegaard til Sartre*, Arne Frost-Hansens Forlag, Copenhagen, 1947, p. 99.

transcendent, absurd Christianity – on the other. Recent research agrees on a continual blurred relationship between Climacus's two forms of religiousness: "Religiousness A and religiousness B are not absolutely separated by Climacus [...] He continues to relate them in complex ways."¹⁹

A constant point of interest – at least for this paper – remains the common urge of our Klimakos and Climacus pseudonyms to be "loyal to religious values whatever happens".²⁰ We will try to follow this broadly, without getting entangled in complex and often confusing doctrinal differences between religiousness A and B, Eastern asceticism, liberal Protestantism etc. Suffice to say that both Klimakos and Climacus believe in God. The former seems to seek a mystical union with him, wishing to get nearer to heaven by climbing a ladder. The latter preserves Klimakos's inwardness, also nurturing the idea of an ascent, yet towards a divinity he cannot grasp or get near to. Both seem ready, or at least inclined, to give up earthly pleasures for the promise of eternal happiness. Since Kierkegaard does not link their searches directly, we must try to find an answer by interrogating his texts. Already in *Philosophical Fragments* Climacus mentions that "the unity [with the god] is brought about by an ascent. The god would then draw the learner up toward himself, exalt him, divert him with joy lasting a thousand years."²¹

Climacus's conception of the monastic movement (renunciation, entrance into the monastery) remains, as we hinted, consistently ambiguous. We can track down – and not only in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* – vacillating argumentation both pro and con monasticism. An important anti-monastic statement is Climacus's argument against a monk's alleged, yet undeserved, saintliness:

¹⁹ Lee C Barrett., "Religious/Religiousness" in KRSRR: *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, Vol. 15, Tome V, "Kierkegaard's Concepts", J., Ashgate, Farnham, England, 2015, ed. by Stewart. J., p. 219.

²⁰ Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, XPRESS REPRINTS, London, 1980, p. 54.

²¹ S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, Princeton University Press, 1987, tr. by Edward & Edna Hong, p. 29.

Had I lived in the Middle Ages I could never have decided to choose monastery. And why? Because in the Middle Ages anyone entering a monastery was in all seriousness accounted a saint. So if I went down the street and met a poor wretch who is perhaps a far better man than I, he would bow to me and take me in *pathos* and earnest for a holy man. But to me this seems the most dreadful thing and a profanation of the holy, a betrayal of the absolute relation to the absolute τέλος.²²

The *Postscript* also explains that Climacus's and his contemporaries' distrust of the monastic movement and the ascetic holy man was caused, in part at least, by the religious teaching of the Danish Church, according to which entering a monastery was an asocial act of civil cowardice, close to heresy. Those who didn't join the local community of believers, and contemplated monasticism, were accused of cowardly avoidance of the "perils of life" and of denying the claims of the Church to exclusive truth. The following quotation is meant not only to prove a point (that Climacus, despite personal reluctance to follow the ascetic path, shows sympathy with the passionate path of monasticism); it is also a sample of both thorough Kierkegaardian logical argumentation and Kierkegaard's literary prowess:

But all due respect for the monastic movement of the Middle Ages. Yes, the priest says that entering the monastery means avoiding the danger, so that the greater thing is to stay amid perils of life – but surely not with the help of mediation? Let us at least try to understand each other and agree on what is meant by danger. The monastery candidate saw the greatest danger as that of not, at very instant, relating absolutely to the absolute τέλος. Mediation knows nothing of this danger; with its help one avoids the absolute danger and the absolute exertion, avoids the solitary and silent association with the absolute in which the least loss is an absolute loss, and the least step backward perdition, here there is no distraction, but where an ever so slight step backwards burns like sunstroke in the memory of the unfortunate who has nowhere to flee, where every weakness, every lack-lustre moment, every disinclination is as if it were a mortal sin, and every such hour like an eternity because time does not go; this is what one avoids, and this is what the priest calls avoiding danger, because one remains in relative dangers, the

²² Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, ed. and tr. by Alastair Hannay, p. 349 (378).

dangers of the manifold, where the simplest experience teaches one that all is never lost (precisely because it is the sphere of the manifold), but that in one way one loses and gains another, where the dangers are those of business and livelihood and health, and being called names in the newspapers.²³

We will not comment here on “absolute τέλος” and “mediation”, as they are terms known by the reader and an explanation would deflect our investigation. An interesting point here is that Climacus is seemingly moving away from his (previously quoted) opposition towards monasticism and adopting an obviously more lenient attitude towards it. In our next three quotations he makes a caustic critique of his Church’s Christianity, lashing out at its comfortable, yet officially preached, idea that the blessed, the extraordinary – man or woman – is the common Sunday church parishioner, the conformist who blindly accepts mediation and church precepts:

It is really sad that the eccentricity of the Middle Ages is misused time and again to teach people to make themselves out to be some devilish fine fellows, and in as much a parody to talk in this way in our day as for a man in a Vartov almshouse to elaborate on the idea that the most courageous thing is not to take one’s own life but not to do so, thus giving the simple old wives there the idea that they are the bravest of all – because they had, after all, the courage not to do it!²⁴

People were made to believe that the absolute respect in which the absolute τέλος was held by those existing would mean entering the monastery. The monastic movement itself was a colossal abstraction, monastic life itself a continued abstraction, a life spent in prayer and hymn-singing – instead of playing cards at the club – there is nothing against caricaturing the one, one must surely be allowed to present the other as it had caricatured itself.²⁵

The Middle Ages bear some resemblance to Greece, and they had what the Greeks had, namely, passion. The monastic movement is therefore a passionate decision, as is fitting in respect to the absolute τέλος, and it is to that extent preferable in its nobility to the wretched middleman-wisdom of mediation.²⁶

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

Often, having believed the promise of Kierkegaard's early authorship – of an uncompromising *Either-Or* attitude towards life's major existential problems – one hopes to receive, for a change, what one might call a direct communication from Kierkegaard, authoritative solutions to the problems raised by his pseudonyms. Instead of being granted clear pro or con advice, the reader is left to navigate his own, hazy, *Both – And* path through limbo, duly reminded – directly and indirectly – to understand the suffering this entails, and make diligent use of his common sense to find his answer. Kierkegaard's Socratic questioning often challenges our assumptions, yet without offering alternatives. We are, every so often, persuaded to abandon – as in a detective story – our first guess and preconceived ideas, and to find our own idea “worth living and dying for”. At the same time, we witness Kierkegaard's own eternal vacillation, change of sides, partisanship etc, be it the case of his first and subsequent positions with regard to Hegel, Socrates and Schelling or, as now, with regard to monasticism and the asceticism of the desert fathers. We are at the same time more or less aware that Kierkegaard seldom adapted his writings to his reader's understanding and expectations, or to the uninstructed student. Kierkegaard's ambiguities, his reluctance to grant grand “Taoist” solutions, remain a nerve-racking enigma, interestingly encapsulated in a remark by Heidegger: “I have forsaken an earlier position, not to exchange it for another, but because even the former position was only a pause on the way. What lasts in thinking is the way.”²⁷



Fig. 1: *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*

(source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ladder_of_Divine_Ascent)

²⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, Harper Colophon Books, 1969, tr. by J.M. Anderson & E.H. Freund, p. 21.

Section Three

As we read in *Prefaces*, “To be an author in Denmark is almost as troublesome as having to live in public view and is especially tortuous for a lyrical author who [...] escapes from all the vociferousness [...] and devotes himself in solitude [...] to a secret reader [...]. To be an author in Denmark is for the most part identical to being an author in Copenhagen, which is just about as problematic as concealing oneself on a plate.”²⁸

A description of Kierkegaard’s claustrophobia, a metaphor of his obscure life in a provincial Copenhagen, exposed to everybody’s gaze, seen and often laughed at by others, makes one almost sense his urge to escape the voyeurism, scrutiny, caricatures, being called a “pot plant” (*stueplante* in Danish). Even today, asserts Olaf Pedersen in his abovementioned book, Kierkegaard’s works are, with few exceptions, often studied with the sole purpose of gaining insight into their author’s peculiar personality, his interaction with his father and other contemporaries. A tabloid curiosity and unrelenting interest in his biography – something much easier to fathom than his thinking – is still a popular way of approaching Kierkegaard’s *authorship*, as well; although it is only reasonable to suppose that his universal fame and relevance must have had another logical explanation than that of having been passively and fatalistically influenced by a limited circle of people and a lifeworld restricted to Copenhagen and a tiny part of Jutland. Can such a flat universe, of nearly Ptolemaic dimensions we may say, become the taproot and inspiration of his authorship? Can a return coach journey to Berlin – even though as exhausting and adventurous as a polar expedition – his only flight from routine, explain his universality? Don’t we wonder what sources other than the plain biographical nourished and triggered his creativity, protean phantasy and dialectical gift? Despite his circumscribed existence and lack of contemporary heavyweight opponents, Kierkegaard’s works continue to demonstrate a particular sensitivity and continuous awareness towards

²⁸ Kierkegaard, *Prefaces, Writing Sampler*, Princeton University Press, 1997, tr. & ed. by T.W. Nicol, p. 15.

stimuli (other than telluric) connected to spirit, religion, God's presence, the idea of discovering Christianity for himself. Georg Brandes, much criticised lately for his critique of Kierkegaard, describes – perhaps more adequately than his well-intentioned defenders – this capability:

There are productive spirits who need many and great destinies or experiences to produce a small work. There is that kind of poet who, from one hundred pounds of rose petals, can produce one drop of rose essence. And there are, on the other hand, talents of a nature so fruitful, whose inner climate is so tropical, that they can extract – from quite an ordinary day, lived with the highest energy – a whole series of important works. They remind one of the arid South Sea islands, where passengers of ships sailing by left behind some fruit seeds, and which were soon afterwards covered by mighty forests. Kierkegaard belonged to the latter kind.²⁹

Without objecting to the roles allegedly played in Kierkegaard's life and authorship by Regine Olsen, his father, Hegel, "The Corsair", his butler, and many others, at the same time we shall take into consideration the influence exerted upon him by such factors as:

Primordial images, the psychic residue of repeated types of experience in the lives of our ancestors which, Jung said, are inherited in the 'collective unconscious' of the human race and are expressed in myths, religion, dreams, and private phantasies, as well as in works of literature. [...] The death-rebirth theme is often said to be the archetype of archetypes [...] which informs a multitude of diverse literary works, including the Bible, Dante's *Divine Comedy* etc. Among other, more limited archetypal themes, images and characters [...] frequently traced in literature are the journey underground, *the heavenly ascent*, and the search for the father.³⁰

If, for some readers, the idea that Kierkegaard was also under an archetypal influence seems improbable or inappropriate, we can find help in

²⁹ Georg Brandes, op. cit. p. 77.

³⁰ M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York, 1971, pp. 11-12. Underlining added.

Paul Valéry's similar *pensée* that "all history is nothing but myth"; that "there are so many myths in us, and such commonplace ones, that it is almost impossible to segregate completely in our minds anything that is not a myth. One cannot even talk about it without creating a myth, and am I not at the moment making a myth of the myth in order to satisfy the whim of a myth?"³¹

Of course, Kierkegaard, Klimakos, Climacus, did not themselves invent a symbol such as that of the ladder of heavenly ascent; neither did William Blake, for that matter, when he painted his ladder (in 1805?). Everybody knew of it – from somewhere else (the idea that even Hegel wished, by means of his speculative thinking, to climb to the heavens, would definitely not amuse Hegel). Klimakos seems to have been inspired by the motif of the ladder whose top reaches heaven (as in the biblical Jacob's dream), with devils trying to undermine the ascent of monks, and angels ascending and descending its thirty rungs. Klimakos's description of the ascent to spiritual perfection is not only a result of his own experience; it is also a synthesis of many of his forerunners' thoughts, his vocabulary being borrowed, partly at least, from Evagrius (346-399), as Nicolae Corneanu mentions in the preface to his Romanian translation of *The Ladder*.³² As soon as we think we have found the original Tower of Babel or ladder of Klimakos, we are told that an older model was extant in Assyria, Mithraic mysteries or, as Mircea Eliade observes: "with the religions of the Indian Archipelago, Malay, Australian, Nepalese tribes [...]. Egyptians too, were furnished by Ra with a ladder to mount into the sky."³³ And again, "The mystical ladder is abundantly documented in Christian tradition: the martyrdom of St Perpetua, the legend of St Olaf. St John Climacus uses the symbolism of the ladder to express the various phases of spiritual ascent."³⁴

To avoid deviating from our route and ending in anthropology and archaeology, we will return to Kierkegaard's "simple" idea of communication

³¹ Paul Valéry, *Selected Writings of Paul Valery*, New Directions Publishing, New York, 1954, p. 200.

³² Ioan Scărarul, *Scara Raiului*, Amarcord, Timișoara, 1997, tr. by Nicolae Corneanu, p. 43.

³³ Mircea Eliade, *op.cit.* pp. 487-88.

³⁴ Mircea Eliade, *ibid.* p. 489.

between heaven and earth, and to his (perhaps unduly disregarded) relationship to Klimakos's motif of ascent by means of a ladder. A ladder to God. (Or, according to the Greeks, to Hera.) Like an aeolian harp, Climacus catches, so to say, a note or idea in the air which becomes the theme of a myth developing throughout his work. He doesn't have to invent anything, only to recognise and acknowledge something already existing. In other words, he "only imitates a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with others, in such a way as never to rest in anyone of them."³⁵

Kierkegaard accomplishes these feats and reaches for his "dear reader", for us, to spark in us meditative thought, to connect us with God, with *axis mundi*, tormented monks of the Gaza desert, with Yggdrasil and the Centre of the World.

I don't know whether the subject I have discussed has previously been approached by others. It has haunted and intrigued me for some time and needed "illumination". Whether the results of my unorthodox, unscientific analytical method are right or wrong, I cannot say. When considering methods, in her leading essay on "Modern Novels"³⁶, Virginia Woolf writes: "Any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express."

I mentioned in one of my quotations the fact that images of a "collective unconscious" (death-rebirth, heavenly ascent) can be detected, among other places, in Dante". As Kierkegaard preferred to call himself a poet, I would like to pay tribute to his poetic philosophy with a liberating Dantesque quotation:

³⁵ Roland Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

³⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Modern Novels*, Times Literary Supplement, April 1919.

Our ladder reaches even to that clime;
 And so, at giddy distance, mocks thy view,
 Thither the patriarch Jacob saw it stretch
 Its topmost round; when it appeared to him
 With Angels laden. But to mount it now
 None lifts his foot from earth: and hence my rule
 Is left a profitless stain upon leaves.³⁷

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³⁷ Dante, Alighieri, *op. cit.*, *Canto XXII*, pp. 68-74.

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Between Action and Suffering: Kierkegaard on Ambiguous Guilt

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Abstract. I draw out from Kierkegaard's work a critical perspective on evaluative frameworks that rely on a sharp distinction between agents and patients. In this perspective, human lives are shaped by complex entanglements of actions and sufferings. By abstracting away from this complexity, the agent/ patient dichotomy occludes important ethical phenomena. I focus here on one such phenomenon: 'ambiguous guilt'. Ambiguous guilt arises from interdependencies between how individuals are passively formed, through what they suffer, and how they are actively formed as agents, through what they do. With reference both to the aesthetic perspective of tragic drama and also the religious idea of human sinfulness, I show how Kierkegaard's work makes a case for our need for evaluative frameworks that remain properly responsive to experiences of ambiguous guilt.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, tragedy, guilt, moral luck, agency, responsibility, complicity, sin.

Among the deep structures of modern ethical thought is the division we make between those who act and those to whom things happen. More or less explicitly, we distinguish agents from patients. We do not typically apply this distinction to whole lives. Instead, we regard individuals as agents or as

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patients with respect to given situations and circumstances. You may be regarded as an agent with respect to whether you keep a promise or steal some pears, for instance; but instead as a patient with respect to whether you succumb to Parkinson's disease or – in this broad sense of 'patient' – with respect to where you happen to have been born and in which family.

It is true that we typically apply the agent/patient dichotomy in ways that admit degrees of responsibility. Considered as an agent, I may be held responsible for my actions to a greater or lesser degree. In a court of law, I may be acquitted or found guilty of murder or manslaughter depending on the degree to which I am deemed responsible for another's death. Nonetheless, we typically apply the agent/ patient distinction as a strict dichotomy, such that to treat a person in the one way is not in the same respect to treat them in the other.¹ That they carry sentences more lenient than murder in no wise gainsays that verdicts of manslaughter are addressed to agents rather than to patients. Conversely, to be sedated – or force-fed, or sectioned under mental health law – is, in certain respects, to be treated unambiguously as a patient.

The agent/ patient dichotomy reaches beyond our courts of law. Its pervasive role in our ethical life is what P. F. Strawson could rely on, for instance, when he distinguished quite generally between two types of attitude: 'reactive' and 'objective'. The reactive attitudes are the ones we adopt when we treat individuals as agents: attitudes such as resentment or gratitude, anger or forgiveness. The objective attitudes, by contrast, are those we adopt when, as Strawson put it, we treat an individual 'as an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of senses, might be called treatment; as something... to be managed or handled or cured or trained' (Strawson, 1974, p. 9). Media outlets divide sharply along these lines in familiar ways, for example when reporting cases involving minors who have

¹ Exceptions to such applications of the agent/patient dichotomy in legal contexts include strict liability in tort law. As Bernard Williams has observed, strict liability is exceptional in the way it detaches responsibility from agency: 'in most spheres of our life regulated by ideas of responsibility, the governing rule relates response to cause: the aim is that the response should be applied to a person whose action was the cause of the harm' (Williams, 1993, p. 57).

been charged with heinous crimes. Some are quick to evoke the reactive attitudes of outrage and blame. Others make a point of maintaining objective distance, representing the children in such cases as themselves victims of wider social forces, pitiable rather than culpable, occasions for social critique.

My aim in this essay is to help make it plausible that our reliance on the agent/ patient dichotomy may blind us to important ethical phenomena. Specifically, I propose to draw on Kierkegaard's work to help bring to light a phenomenon I shall call ambiguous guilt (his own rubric is: 'guilty/ not guilty'²). Attributions of ambiguous guilt are based on perceptions of wrongness in a person's life, where the relevant kind of wrongness resists being understood either as having been brought upon oneself or as merely suffered. Bearers of ambiguous guilt are intelligible neither as guilty agents *rather than* suffering patients, nor *vice versa*. Here, the agent/ patient dichotomy strikes a false note.

I shall begin by showing how the idea of ambiguous guilt enters into Kierkegaard's thoughts about the essence of tragedy (§1). I shall then consider why he thinks there is something consoling about tragic drama in its capacity to portray ambiguous guilt as such (§2). Finally, I shall consider how his work further supports a view in which religious categories are also responsive to experiences of ambiguous guilt: specifically, the category of human sinfulness (§3). On the overall view that shall emerge, while it may be important in moral-juridical contexts for us sharply to distinguish agents from patients, we need to retain other contexts of assessment which allow us properly to recognize the ways in which human lives are shaped by complex entanglements of actions and sufferings.

² 'Guilty? / Not Guilty?' is the title of a section in *Stages on Life's Way* (subtitle: 'a story of suffering'). See *Kierkegaard's Writing (KW)*, XI pp. 185-494. This text includes a characterisation of the religious person as one who lives before God 'under the qualification: guilty/ not guilty' (*Ibid*, p. 463).

1. Ambiguous guilt as the essence of tragedy

The literary ensemble that makes up the first part of *Either/Or* includes the essay, ‘Ancient Tragedy’s Reflection in the Modern’.³ Written in the voice of an ideal-typical aesthete, this essay takes up the question of whether and how the essence of ancient tragedy might also be inflected in modern expressions of this form of drama. For this essayist, the crux of the issue is whether and how modern tragedies can convey ‘tragic guilt’.⁴ The following dense passage articulates why he takes this to be the crux:

[A] difference between ancient and modern tragedy that I regard as very important... [is] the different nature of tragic guilt. It is well known that Aristotle insists that the tragic hero have *hamartia* [error, missing the mark]. But just as the action in Greek tragedy is something intermediate between action and the suffering, so also is guilt, and therein lies the tragic collision. But the more the subjectivity is reflective, the more Pelagianly one sees the individual thrown solely upon himself, the more ethical guilt becomes. Between these two extremes lies the tragic. If the individual has no guilt whatever, the tragic interest is annulled, for in that case the tragic collision is enervated. On the other hand, if he has absolute guilt, he no longer interests us tragically. It is, therefore, surely a misunderstanding of the tragic when our age endeavours to have everything fateful transubstantiate itself into individuality and subjectivity. We want to know nothing about the hero's past; we load his whole life upon his shoulders as his own deed, make him accountable for everything, but in so doing we also transform his esthetic guilt into ethical guilt. (*KW* III.1: 144)

³ I use here Alastair Hannay’s translation of the title of this essay (Kierkegaard (1992) [1843]). The Hongs offer the less pithy: ‘The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama’ (*KW* III.1 p. 137).

⁴ I take it that Kierkegaard’s own authorial voice is not to be conflated with those of the fictional authors which populate his pseudonymous literature. In the hermeneutic approach I favour, and adopt in this essay, Kierkegaard’s fictional authors are designed to typify various points of view, where the latter are to be distinguished not primarily by reference to differences of opinion but rather by different normative orientations as embodied in concrete forms of human subjectivity.

On this account, it is of the essence of tragic drama to portray a type of guilt that is ‘something intermediate between action and the suffering’. Let me approach an interpretation of what this means by way of a comparison with two potential rivals.

Consider, first, any view in which the essence of ancient tragedy is to portray the suffering that arises from our inherent human vulnerability to that which lies beyond our control. So conceived, tragedies are, in Bernard Williams’ terms, ‘stark fictions’, apt to expose the ‘inexplicable necessity’ of human suffering, ‘a necessity which may indeed be ascribed to the activities of the gods, but if so, to gods who do not explain themselves or take any notice of the suffering that they bring about’ (Williams, 1996, 51).⁵ On this approach – call it Tragic Necessity – what belongs to ancient tragedy is its unflinching portrayal of human suffering at the hands of fate, natural necessity, misfortune, and, not least, the capricious gods.⁶

A second useful contrast is any view in which the essence of ancient tragedy is to portray practical agents who face ethical dilemmas arising from conflicts among competing ethical values or principles. A paradigm for this approach – call it Tragic Conflict – is the reading of Sophocles’ *Antigone* that is often attributed to Hegel, in terms of the coming to consciousness of certain inherent tensions within the value-framework of Greek ethical life: roughly, the conflict between the values represented by Antigone herself and associated more generally with women, the home and family life, and, on the

⁵ With these references to his work, I do not mean to suggest that Williams exactly endorses the Tragic Necessity view. It is true that much of what he says, for example about Sophocles’ plays as exemplary ‘stark fictions’, appears to point in this direction. However, Williams also expresses suspicion about any general account of the essence of tragedy: ‘One of several disservices that Aristotle rendered to the understanding of Greek tragedy was that of generating the idea that there is some one specific effect that makes tragedy ethically significant.’ (Williams, 1996, p. 50)

⁶ It is tempting to associate Tragic Necessity with Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*. Certainly, this view captures a way that Nietzsche’s early thoughts on tragedy are sometimes presented (see e.g. Soll, 1988.) However, Tragic Necessity arguably oversimplifies even the early Nietzsche given, for example, his description of Sophocles’ portrayal of Oedipus in terms of a ‘divine dialectic’ of activity and passivity (Nietzsche, 1999 [1872] p. 47). See also Han-Pile, 2006.

other hand, the values associated with Kreon and more generally with men, the city and politics.⁷ In this reading, it is due to this determinate conflict of values that, whichever way she chooses with respect to the question of whether or not to honour her dead brother, Antigone cannot but do wrong.

Compared with the two approaches just outlined, Kierkegaard's essayist offers a perspective on ancient tragedy that incorporates elements of both but is reducible to neither. As in *Tragic Necessity*, he emphasizes the idea of a boundary between the arena of effectual human agency and, on the other hand, the sphere in which we find ourselves at the mercy of forces beyond our control. As in *Tragic Conflict*, moreover, he associates tragedy with protagonists who experience a sort of ethical 'collision'. However, he understands the tragic collision in a different way: neither merely in terms of the horrors arising from our inherent human fragility and vulnerability, nor yet as reducible to the dilemmas faced by practical agents due to determinate conflicts between competing values. At the heart of his alternative account is the idea of tragic guilt as 'something intermediate between action and the suffering'. How then are we to understand this?

In the passage cited above, the singular character of tragic guilt is defined through a contrast with 'ethical guilt', where the latter refers quite generally to guilt arising from culpable acts of wrongdoing. The contrast is twofold. Firstly, tragic guilt involves attributions of types of wrongness (*hamartia*) that are not unambiguously ethical in character.⁸ This is reflected

⁷ According to Hegel, 'The original essence of tragedy consists ... in the fact that within such a conflict each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has justification ... The consequence is that in its ethical life, and because of it, each [side] is nevertheless involved in guilt.' (Hegel, 1988 [1835], p. 1196). Interpretations of Hegel on tragedy that emphasise the idea of a two-sided conflict of right against right, in general and with special reference to *Antigone*, include Stern, 2001 and Williams, 2012. See also Nussbaum, 1986 and 1989.

⁸ With reference to Aristotle's *Poetics*, and specifically *hamartia*, Daniel Greenspan presents Kierkegaard as a forerunner of more recent critiques of moralizing interpretations (where the latter see the tragic hero's suffering as 'poetic justice' for his faults.) Summarizing Kierkegaard's critical perspective on moralizing interpretations, Greenspan writes: 'The ambiguity of Aristotle's innovative term, *ἁμαρτία*, is lost, becomes senseless, or rather is stripped of its original flexibility and reconstituted in the strictness of an ethics in which the subjects of reason, no matter what, are always themselves to blame. The *Poetics*' early modern readers interpreted it as such, from the Italians of the sixteenth century down to

in the way such wrongness is apt to be described in terms other than the narrowly moral: in terms of one's having become tainted or polluted, for example, or having fallen short of the mark, or of one's life having become somehow out of joint or dissonant. Secondly, the bearers of tragic guilt are not, as such, unambiguously ethical agents: their fall into *hamartia* cannot be straightforwardly interpreted as having been brought upon themselves.

Kierkegaard's essayist means here to tread a fine line, however. His contrast between types of guilt, tragic (or 'aesthetic') and ethical, is qualified by the fact that he presents both, after all, as types of *guilt* (*skyld*).⁹ To deny that tragic guilt is unambiguously ethical is not to deny that it involves attributions of wrongness and lost innocence; and to deny that the bearer of tragic guilt is unambiguously its agent is not to say that it in no way pertains to the agency of those who bear it. Here we return to the crucial phrase, 'something intermediate between action and the suffering'. In the view of Kierkegaard's essayist, any sharp dichotomy between actions and sufferings, agents and patients, can only cover over the range of human experience that it belongs to ancient tragedy to bring to light.

From this perspective, there is something one-sided in both of the views outlined above. Whereas Tragic Necessity places the emphasis on human passivity and suffering, under exposure to chance and necessity, Tragic Conflict makes central problems of choice and practical reason in the face of determinate conflicts of value. In the alternative view of Kierkegaard's essayist – call it Tragic Ambiguity – what it belongs to ancient tragedy to explore is instead the ambiguous human experience between ethical guilt and mere victimhood. As he puts it, 'between these two extremes lies the tragic'.

Lessing. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, represents an early break with this misrepresentation of tragic ἀμαρτία in both Aristotle and the poets. It would take modern scholarship decades to catch up with him.' (Greenspan, 2010, p. 65) The flexibility of ἀμαρτία in Aristotle and tragic drama is closely argued in Stinton, 1975 and see also Vernant, 1988, p. 65ff.

⁹ I take it that by 'aesthetic guilt', Kierkegaard's essayist means nothing other than *hamartia* as portrayed in the aesthetic form of tragic drama, i.e. what he also calls 'tragic guilt'.

Paradigmatic for Kierkegaard's essayist here is Sophocles' *Oedipus* trilogy. What he associates above all with these towering plays is the idea of one's becoming guilty *through familial bonds*. He writes:

Tragic action always contains an element of suffering, and tragic suffering an element of action: the aesthetic lies in their relativity... The ever admired trilogy of Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Oedipus the King*, and *Antigone*, hinges essentially on this genuine tragic interest. But hereditary guilt involves the contradiction of being guilty and yet not being guilty. The bond by which the individual becomes guilty is precisely [filial] piety, but the guilt that it thereby incurs has every possible aesthetic amphiboly. (*KW* III.1, p. 150)

In this reading, the tragic interest of the *Oedipus* plays turns on the way their protagonists come to find their very acts of fidelity and reverence put them in the wrong, where this leads to a radical form of ethical disorientation. Is Antigone merely a victim of her sullied family history and its ill-fatedness? Or, by how she acts out of her natural (albeit troublingly intimate) fidelity to her dishonoured brother, is she guilty of ethical failure? In the view of Kierkegaard's essayist, her tragic interest lies in our lack of a method to settle such questions. If, in a straightforwardly ethical spirit, we ask whether Antigone is guilty or innocent, we may find ourselves with good reason to answer 'neither', or 'both'. That she herself cannot settle the question – am I guilty or not? – is the crux of her tragic predicament.¹⁰

Kierkegaard's essayist describes this type of guilt (in a flourish of Hegelian dialectics) as a 'contradiction of being guilty and yet not being guilty'. The paradox is based on an ontological premise about, for example, Antigone's relationship to the fate through which her family comes to ruin. The premise is that this relationship is an interdependence of actions and sufferings. In attending to her dead brother, say, or in her break with Haemon, the actions Antigone takes are genuine deeds, genuinely hers. It is not as

¹⁰ See especially *Antigone*, lines 920-928.

though these merely befall her.¹¹ On the other hand, her actions are inseparable from the filial bonds through which she comes to inherit the calamitous destiny of the Labdacids. If she finds herself guilty, this is therefore not as an agent *rather than* a patient. In tragic guilt, the active, agential element cannot be separated from the passive, suffering element in the way required by unambiguous attributions of ethical guilt. The two are thoroughly intertwined.

This conception of ambiguous guilt might seem to anticipate themes in the more recent Anglophone debates about ‘moral luck’. As introduced into these debates by Thomas Nagel, ‘constitutive luck’, for example, is the class of those factors that significantly shape who one is, but which lie outside one’s control: one’s genes, family traits, upbringing and so forth (Nagel, 1993). ‘Constitutive moral luck’ is then the paradox of one’s being deemed praiseworthy or blameworthy for such features. The idea of tragic guilt in *Either / Or*, however, would not be well captured by the idea of constitutive moral (bad) luck. For this would be to miss the other side of tragic guilt, *viz.* the dependence of how the tragic hero suffers her fate on how she acts. On this account, and in contrast with the idea of sheer bad luck, the tragic hero is in some sense complicit in the way her life is shaped by factors beyond her control.¹²

Now, the notion of complicity may seem to take us back into the realm of straightforwardly ethical categories. After all, we sometimes use the concept of complicity in such a way that an individual can be deemed unambiguously guilty with respect to her collusion in some moral wrongdoing. To be clear then: the tragic protagonist is not supposed to be complicit in her fate if a person’s actions can be complicit only when they causally contribute to some discrete moral wrong and/ or are performed

¹¹ For an illuminating discussion of the problematic sense in which Antigone exemplifies an ideal of moral autonomy, see McNeill, 2014.

¹² Compare Jean-Pierre Vernant who writes of the ‘tension that the tragedians constantly maintain between the active and the passive, intention and constraint, the internal spontaneity of the hero and the destiny that is fixed in advance for him by the gods’ (Vernant, 1988, p. 79).

under conditions of full agential control.¹³ The relevant notion instead is that of one's being implicated *qua* agent in a process that is nonetheless radically beyond one's control. While the tragic hero suffers her fate, she does not *merely* suffer it: her own agency is engaged.

Kierkegaard's texts do not offer a detailed elaboration of this notion of agential implication.¹⁴ In the remainder of this paper, however, my aim is to further explore why he thinks of ambiguous guilt as a falling outside of the sphere of ethical evaluation, under a certain conception of the ethical, and as such that we need other contexts of assessment properly to bring it into view.

2. Ambiguous guilt and the consolations of the aesthetic

In *Either/ Or*, the idea of ambiguous guilt arises in the context of an argument regarding the historical development of tragic drama. Kierkegaard's essayist wants to show how interdependencies of action and suffering play out in different ways in ancient and modern tragedies, respectively.¹⁵ In ancient tragedies, he argues, the element of suffering and fate is dominant; in modern tragedies, the balance tips more toward subjectivity and action. The bottom line, however, is that any tragedy worthy

¹³ In contemporary discussions, complicity is often analyzed in terms of a relation between principal and secondary agents where, considered in themselves, the actions of a secondary agent may be morally innocent but nonetheless blameworthy with respect to the actions of a principal action. See e.g. Lepora & Goodin, 2013.

¹⁴ One place we might look for such elaboration is the current work on implicit bias. However, often building on ideas of moral luck, major figures in this field continue to rely on a sharp division between guilt and innocence, even when they admit cases of 'no-fault responsibility'. See e.g. Fricker, 2016. More amenable to the idea of a region 'between' action and suffering is the account of 'middle-voiced agency' developed by Béatrice Han-Pile in her recent work on Nietzsche (Han-Pile, 2020).

¹⁵ Kierkegaard here inherits a task central to discussions of tragedy after Lessing. Joshua Billings describes as follows this task, as it emerged for German intellectuals from the 1770s onwards: 'Despite Lessing's advocacy, Shakespeare still seems unclassifiable in the classical dramatic categories. The challenge for the younger generation will be to formulate Shakespeare's difference from the ancients while still seeing him as a part of a continuous tradition of tragedy – or, perhaps better, of the tragic... Can ancient and modern tragedies be compared? Is the tragic possible in modernity?' (Billings, 2014, pp. 43-44)

of the name must serve to make manifest phenomena of this type: experiences of ethical disorientation, in the form of ambiguous guilt, arising from interdependencies of action and suffering.

It soon becomes clear that this argument also has a critical edge. It is animated by a perceived threat of aesthetic stultification: specifically, the worry that modern audiences are increasingly desensitized to tragedy. Kierkegaard's essayist supposes that, under the sway of the Enlightenment ideal of the reflectively self-determining agent, fully autonomous and self-sufficient, modern audiences tend to operate with a sharp dichotomy between actions and sufferings. For this reason, he fears, modern audiences are liable to miss the phenomenon of ambiguous guilt: to miss it entirely, or to misinterpret it by trying in a given dramatic context to settle the question one way or the other: is the protagonist agent or victim?

This is evidently the worry behind such passages as the one cited above which highlights the danger of an audience 'Pelagianly' seeing the individual protagonist 'thrown solely upon himself' and which ends on this note of lament: 'We want to know nothing about the hero's past; we load his whole life upon his shoulders as his own deed, make him accountable for everything, but in so doing we also transform his esthetic guilt into ethical guilt.' (*KW* III.1, p. 144)¹⁶ The essayist goes on to muse that the tendency to try to treat the tragic hero on the model of the self-determining agent may 'have its basis in the working of the whole age toward the comic' (*Ibid*). He means to highlight a comically incongruent aspect of our modern ethical stance and self-image, given that our lives remain in so many ways fragile and dependent, at the mercy of forces beyond our control. In this perspective, we are comically deluded when we carry on as though we were sovereign authors of our own life-stories, perhaps even congratulating ourselves on having long outgrown childish notions of fate or hereditary guilt.¹⁷

¹⁶ The allusion is of course to Pelagius (c. AD 354 – 418), in opposition to whose doctrine of human freedom Augustine developed his interpretations of original sin.

¹⁷ For illuminating discussion of this theme of the modern tendency toward the comic, with illustrative reference to the films of Werner Herzog, see Eagan and Thornton, 2020.

In the view of Kierkegaard's essayist, it is a deleterious consequence of our modern tendency to view the protagonists of tragic drama as self-determining agents that we are liable to miss out on the distinctive *value* of this aesthetic form. For he articulates a view in which the value of tragic drama is closely bound up with its capacity to portray ambiguous guilt. In this view, tragic drama is apt to provide us with a kind of relief from strictly ethical forms of appraisal, *i.e.* from the stance in which we apply the agent/patient distinction for the purposes of moral evaluation. If we will but let it, great tragic drama can provide relief from this perspective by opening up a different context of assessment:

Intrinsically, the tragic is infinitely gentle; esthetically it is to human life what divine grace and compassion are... The ethical is rigorous and hard. Therefore, if a criminal before the judge wants to excuse himself by saying that his mother had a propensity for stealing, especially during the time she was pregnant with him, the judge obtains the health officer's opinion of his mental condition and decides that he is dealing with a thief and not with the thief's mother. (*KW* III.1, p. 145)

In a court of law, if I have committed a crime and am not deemed mentally ill, the judge will apply to me the model of the autonomous agent: I will – to some degree, but at any rate strictly, unambiguously – be held culpable. This is the sense in which ‘the ethical is rigorous and hard’. In contrast, the ‘infinitely gentle’ aspect of tragic drama is its capacity to reveal such ethical contexts of assessment to rely in general on a simplifying abstraction from the complex entanglements of action and suffering that shape human lives.

How, then, is the perspective of tragic drama supposed to be consoling? Is it somehow supposed to be morally *exculpatory*? Surely not. Consider, for example, a passage from Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, apropos Shakespeare's *Richard III*. What makes Shakespeare's protagonist such a monster?

Evidently the fact that he could not bear the pity he had been subjected to since childhood. His monologue in the first act of *Richard III* is worth more than all the moral systems which have no inkling of the terrors of existence or of the explanation of them. 'I, that am rudely stamped, and want love's majesty / To strut before a wanton ambling nymph; / I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion, / Cheated of feature by dissembling nature, / Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time / Into this breathing world, scarce half made up, / And that so lamely and unfashionable / That dogs bark at me as I halt by them.' Such natures as that of Gloucester one cannot save by mediating them into an idea of society. Ethics in fact only makes sport of them... (KW VI, p. 105)

It would not be plausible to say that, in the perspective afforded by Shakespeare's play, Gloucester's heinous crimes are somehow excused or even rendered less monstrous. That he has become radically alienated from the social world and that he therefore cannot be saved by *Sittlichkeit*, communal ethical life – none of this is supposed to exonerate him. Here, we return to the point that, in the account of Kierkegaard's essayist in *Either/Or*, tragic guilt is not assimilable to moral bad luck. For, it involves instead an inseparable relationship between how the protagonist is passively formed, through what befalls him, and how he actively constitutes himself as an agent, through what he does.

How then can the perspective afforded by tragic drama be consoling if this is not by being exculpatory? Certainly, there seems nothing much consoling, neither for protagonists nor audiences, in the bleak narrative content of great tragedies such as *Antigone* or *Richard III*. What Kierkegaard's essayist nonetheless sees as consoling for the audience, I submit, is the very way in which this form of drama is capable of giving expression to ambiguous guilt *as such*: that is, in all its ambiguity. With reference to Sophocles, he writes:

[W]hen Antigone, in defiance of the king's injunction, decides to bury her brother, we see in this not so much a free act as a fateful necessity, which visits the iniquities of the fathers upon the children. There is indeed enough freedom in it to enable us to love Antigone for her sisterly love, but in the inevitability of fate there is also a higher refrain, as it were, that encompasses not only Oedipus's life but also his family. (KW III.1, p. 156)

This suggests a view in which it belongs to the art of tragic drama simultaneously to elicit from the audience two contrasting types of attitude. Deploying Strawson's terms, we might describe this as the superimposition of 'objective' onto 'reactive' attitudes. As the drama unfolds, audiences first respond to the tragic hero's deeds *qua* deeds, as it may be in admiration or in recoil. However, such reactive attitudes are then overlaid by the objective stance in which the audience is invited (sorrowfully) to contemplate the hero as ill-fated. (In ancient tragedy, and by contrast with the modern, Kierkegaard's essayist sees this invitation to the objective stance as typically reinforced by the chorus.¹⁸) Plausibly, this dramatic effect relies on the portrayal of the hero as caught up in processes over which they lack overall control – but in which they nonetheless participate.¹⁹ Thus, Sophocles portrays Antigone's decisions as participating in the process that is 'as it were, the afterpains, Oedipus's tragic fate spreading out into each branch of his family' (*Ibidem*).

This suggests, in turn, the following interpretation of the description in which tragic drama represents a region 'between' action and suffering. Rather than applying the agent/patient distinction as a strict dichotomy, we may in general treat the two disjuncts instead as models. On this approach, cases will vary according to whether they warrant the one model or the other, relative to a context of assessment. If I am caught stealing, it may be warranted in a context of legal sanction to apply to me the model of the responsible agent. If I am mentally ill, this may in the same context of

¹⁸ As Kierkegaard's essayist puts it: 'whether the chorus comes closer to epic substantiality or to the lyrical élan, it nevertheless seems to provide "the more," so to speak, that will not merge in the individuality' (*KW* III.1, p. 143). He goes on to specify this 'more', over and above the intentions and actions of individuals, with 'the essential fateful factor' in Greek tragedy (*Ibidem*).

¹⁹ With reference to the passage just cited, Julian Young complains that Kierkegaard is mistaken to infer that we must think of Antigone in some sense as free for us to love her for her sisterly affection (Young, 2013, p. 143). To demonstrate the fallacy, Young offers: you don't have to attribute freedom to a sunset to love it. This criticism surely misses the point. The relevant type of reaction to Antigone's sisterly affection is not the type we show to inanimate objects or still-life scenes but the type we show to those we regard as agents, participants in an unfolding drama. This general type of reaction is also exemplified for example when Kreon's intransigence elicits our resentment.

assessment warrant instead the model of the suffering patient. For Kierkegaard's essayist, however, the possibility of deep entanglements between action and suffering means that there must be some situations, in some contexts of assessment, in which neither model is warranted. Or, rather, these situations warrant neither model to the exclusion of the other but may, by the same token, permit the simultaneous use of both – as in the overlaying of objective over reactive attitudes just described. Such mixed representations belong not in the sphere of the ethical – the context of moral evaluation and *Sittlichkeit* – but in the sphere of the aesthetic, specifically in works of tragic drama.

Lest we complain that the tragic perspective is no longer available to us, since we no longer believe in fate, Kierkegaard's essayist offers his own version of the Antigone story.²⁰ This modernized Antigone discovers the appalling truth of her father's life but, for all she knows, she is the only one in the know. We are to imagine her jealously guarding these secrets, out of love for her father and for the sake of his honour, but in such a way as to close off her own chances of fulfilment, not least through the self-disclosure of marriage. Thus, her anxious guarding of the family secrets renders this modern Antigone ethically disoriented, ambiguously guilty with respect to ethical norms of transparency and self-disclosure. Kierkegaard's essayist wants to show that, no less than Sophocles' original version, his modernized Antigone exemplifies ambiguous guilt.²¹

²⁰ His appeal to the transhistorical validity of the tragic perspective puts Kierkegaard's essayist in opposition to historicist accounts according to which, as Vernant put it, 'the rise, flowering and decline of tragedy – all within the space of less than a hundred years – mark a particular historical moment of strictly limited duration' (Vernant, 1988, p. 79). For his part, however, Vernant also sometimes writes as though ancient tragedy discloses something inherent in the human condition: 'Tragedy expresses this weakness inherent in action, this internal inadequacy of the agent, by showing the gods working behind men's backs from beginning to end of the drama, to bring everything to its conclusion. Even when, by exercising choice, he makes a decision, the hero almost always does the opposite of what he thinks he is doing' (*Ibid.*, p. 83).

²¹ Among plausible candidates for a modern literary case study in ambiguous guilt is Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Julian Moynahan comments: 'Pip is Dickens's most complicated hero, demonstrating at once the traits of criminal and gull, of victimiser and

In the overall account, then, tragic drama is consoling not by being exculpatory but by relativizing the very standpoint of ethical evaluation to the extent that the latter relies on a sharp agent/patient distinction. Its ‘gentleness’ consists not in giving us excuses but in opening up a perspective on *hamartia* which fosters attitudes of sorrowful contemplation over and above ethical appraisal and moral censure. Such drama thereby can therefore serve to explore important dimensions of what it means to be human: dimensions that would be occluded if the only perspective available to us were the one in which questions of guilt always have unambiguous answers.

In my view, these points illustrate what is missed by those readings of Kierkegaard in which his only real interest in the aesthetic is as a surpassed stage in ideal stories of self-improvement, to be left behind as soon as possible for higher things. That is, part of what goes missing in such readings is the aspect of Kierkegaard’s work in which the aesthetic is *vindicated*, as its own delimited sphere and salutary counterweight to the ethical. In this aspect, his work has an interest in protecting the aesthetic sphere against encroachment from the ethical, parallel (albeit ultimately subdominant) to its interest in the religious.

Finally, however, let me try also to bring out some of the specifically religious dimensions in Kierkegaard’s thinking about ambiguous guilt.

3. Ambiguous guilt and the consolations of the religious

In a wider view of his work than the essay on tragedy in *Either/Or*, it is clear that Kierkegaard had a particular interest in the possibility of giving expression to ambiguous guilt. Evidence for this includes an entry in one of his notebooks which falls under the heading ‘Vocalizations for *On the*

victim.... He is, in short, a hero sinned against and sinning: sinned against because in the first place the dream was thrust upon the helpless child by powerful and corrupt figures from the adult world; a sinner because in accepting for himself a goal in life based upon unbridled individualism and indifference to others, he takes up a career which Great Expectations repeatedly, through a variety of artistic means, portrays as essentially criminal.’ (Moynahan, 1960, p. 77).

Concept of Anxiety'. The heading is itself intriguing. In his biography, Joakim Garff comments:

The most horrifying part [sc. of its subject matter] was not included in *The Concept of Anxiety*. Rather, it cowered shamefully in the last of the nine little, colourful school notebooks used for drafts, and the white label affixed to its shiny black paper cover cryptically states "Vocalizations for On the Concept of Anxiety." In the Semitic languages, a vocalization is the addition of vowels to the consonants, which makes the letters pronounceable and gives the word meaning. So with his "Vocalizations" Kierkegaard wishes to clarify the meaning of *The Concept of Anxiety*, perhaps to reveal a text behind the text. Thus as a sort of motto he wrote on the outside of the booklet with a coarse pencil, "loquere ut videam te," which translates roughly as "speak, that I may see you". (Garff, 2000, p. 348)

For Garff, the image of vocalizations, and the accompanying Latin motto, betray a struggle to give voice to whatever repressed experiences may lie behind Kierkegaard's personal interest in the topics of anxiety and hereditary sin.

While Garff is no doubt right that they have an autobiographical dimension, it is nonetheless striking just how varied are the items to be found among Kierkegaard's 'vocalizations'. Under the subheading, 'Examples of the Consequences of the Relations of Generations', he cites various figures from folklore, including Robert le diable, who discovered himself to have been the progeny of his mother's tryst with the devil, and Høgne, who discovered himself to have been conceived through his mother's intercourse with a troll.²² The list also includes Beatrice Cenci and Shelley's treatment of her tragic history of sexual abuse and patricide; a case in which a girl follows her sisters into prostitution; and a scenario in which the discovery of a dark secret about his father profoundly disturbs the life of a son. Also, these:

²² Garff's insinuation that the examples in Kierkegaard's 'vocalizations' are hidden away in a notebook is rather belied by the fact that many of these appear in published work: for example, the case of Robert le diable and Høgne also feature in the essay on tragedy in *Either/ Or*: see *KW* III.1, p. 155.

‘the addiction of drunkard parents passed on to the child / addiction to thievery / unnatural vices / melancholia / madness that makes its appearance at a certain age.’ (cited in Garff, *Idem.*)

Many of Kierkegaard’s examples involve relationships to parents or siblings. This rule is not without exception, however. In several places, he envisages a scenario in which a girl falls into ambiguous guilt through seduction by an older man.²³ The structure of this example suggests others (perhaps ‘Stockholm Syndrome’, for instance). Moreover, in the broadly Hegelian terms of the essay on tragedy in *Either/Or*, the family – as a determining factor in making a person who he or she is – is subsumed under the broader category of ‘substantial determinants’. In addition to the family, this encompasses the state, various kinds of social institutions as well as, in the world of Greek tragedy, fate. Extrapolating from Kierkegaard’s examples, we might cite being acculturated into a racist society, for instance, as one sort of ‘substantial determinant’ which may shape individual agents and foster conditions of ambiguous guilt.

Thus, while some of his examples are no doubt quixotic and cryptically autobiographical, there is a strong case that, as Kierkegaard sees it, ambiguous guilt is all too familiar and pervasive in human experience. From this perspective, his ‘vocalizations’ can be read more sympathetically than in Garff’s talk of shameful cowering: namely, as phenomenological touchstones for his reflections on anxiety and the doctrine of hereditary sin. In fact, the importance of religious categories in his thinking about ambiguous guilt is already indicated in the essay on tragedy in *Either/Or*. In the course of his discussion of the sorrowful repose of tragic drama, Kierkegaard’s essayist also introduces, in passing, the idea of a distinctively religious take on ambiguous guilt. He writes:

²³ See, for example, *KW* VIII, pp. 66-67; 238 fn. 26. Plausibly, this is also the significance of the reference, in the vocalizations notebook, to the legend of Merlin and Nimue (where, in one version, the young Nimue is both attracted and repulsed by Merlin as one who through sorcery could take her unwillingly).

But although the esthetic provides this repose before sin's profound discrepancy is asserted, the religious does not provide it until this discrepancy is seen in all its frightfulness. At the very moment the sinner almost swoons under the universal sin that he has taken upon himself because he felt simply that the more guilty he became the greater would be the prospect of being saved, at that same dreadful moment he has the consoling thought that it is universal sinfulness that has asserted itself also in him. But this comfort is a religious comfort... (KW III.1, p. 146).

Thus, alongside the consolations of the aesthetic, the essayist also envisages a distinctively religious form of relief from the hard taskmaster of ethics. This is the perspective in which we are *all* ambiguously guilty, before God and just by being human, all and equally in need of grace.

What distinguishes these two kinds of consolation, aesthetic and religious? At one level, they console in the same way: *i.e.* through their capacity to relativize the narrowly ethical standpoint and acknowledge ethically ambiguous dimensions of our lives. However, Kierkegaard evidently sees the religious consolation as having its own distinct character and irreducible existential force. In the passage just cited, the religious interpretation of ambiguous guilt is briefly indicated as 'sin's profound discrepancy' and as 'universal human sinfulness' asserting itself in the individual. How, then, does Kierkegaard mean to differentiate this religious take on ambiguous guilt from what he finds in tragic drama?

A comprehensive discussion of this issue would need to take in a large body of work, not least *The Concept of Anxiety*. I shall not try to provide such a discussion here. Instead, I want to bring to bear some evidence that stands in closer textual proximity to the essay on tragedy in *Either/Or*: namely, the little homily with which that singular book ends, as its last word ('Ultimatum'). Within the fictional economy of *Either/Or*, this sermon is ingeniously framed as offering a perspective which cannot be reduced to either the ethical or the aesthetic. (In the fiction, the sermon is the work of a certain Jutland minister, the friend of the Judge who typifies the ethical sphere and who passes the sermon on to his other friend, the aesthete of Part One, for the latter's edification.)

Early on in his sermon, the preacher emphasizes that what he has to say will be lost on anyone who is unfamiliar with a certain sort of experience. He introduces the sort of experience he has in mind as a feeling of being unable to take refuge in the ‘cosy conclusion’ that, since we humans are frail creatures, even God surely cannot expect too much of us, so long as ‘one does what one can’:

Was it such an easy matter for you, my listener, to determine how much that is: what one can? Were you never in such danger that you almost desperately exerted yourself and yet so infinitely wished to be able to do more, and perhaps someone else looked at you with a skeptical and imploring look, whether it was not possible that you could do more? Or were you never anxious about yourself, so anxious that it seemed to you as if there were no sin so black, no selfishness so loathsome, that it could not infiltrate you and like a foreign power gain control of you? Did you not sense this anxiety? For if you did not sense it, then do not open your mouth to answer, for then you cannot reply to what is being asked; but if you did sense it, then, my listener, I ask you: Did you find rest in those words, “One does what one can”? (*KW* III.2, p. 345)

This passage invokes two sorts of scenario. The first involves a situation of crisis. We might for instance envisage an aid-worker in a war zone, or in the midst of a public health crisis, working flat-out, but still turning away people in desperate need. In retrospect, the aid-worker *might* console herself with the thought, “well, I did all I could!”. But she might instead find herself restlessly anxious, haunted by the question, “*could* I have done more?” The second scenario involves a prospective sense of ethical frailty, a feeling of vulnerability to ‘breaking bad’. We might think here of the recovering addict who knows all too well how close she is at every moment to relapse. From the perspective of such experience, sin is always crouching at the door.

While these two sorts of case are in some ways quite different, they share a feature we might describe as *ethical self-doubt*. (Notably, the Judge in *Either/Or* makes quite the contrary impression, *i.e.* one of ethical self-satisfaction.) However, the relevant kind of self-doubt is evidently not

supposed to be the kind that involves comparing oneself unfavourably to fellow humans. It is not a feeling of inadequacy in the light of others' ethical prowess. On the contrary, the preacher immediately goes on to sketch a third sort of scenario in which ethical self-doubt is intensified through experiences of the all-too-human frailties of those others whom one is otherwise most inclined to admire.

This point sheds light on how Kierkegaard sees sinfulness in relation to tragic guilt. Both categories respond to human vulnerability to *hamartia* through our relationships to that which lies beyond our control.²⁴ Both therefore stand in contrast to strictly ethical categories. They differ, however, in this. In tragedy, what is at issue is our vulnerability to *hamartia* in ways that differentiate us from our fellows, e.g. *qua* daughter of Oedipus or *qua* son of Gertrude – or *qua* son of Michael Pederson Kierkegaard.²⁵ In the religious understanding of sin, what is at issue is our falling short *qua* human. This difference is reflected in contrasting interpretations of ambiguous guilt. Construed as tragic, ambiguous guilt takes shape against some standard of an exemplary human life: some ethical standard against which Antigone's life, for example, could only be deemed to fall short. Construed as sinfulness, by contrast, ambiguous guilt puts us all in the same boat: in the words of the Apostle, 'For all have sinned (*Hēmarton*), and fallen short of the glory of God' (Rom 3:23).

In closing, let me consider three natural objections to the preacher who gets the last word in *Either/Or*. The first is that the kind of self-doubt he envisages is either simply unwarranted or serves to reveal nothing more than a person's individual shortcomings. The second objection is that, while

²⁴ Notably, 'sin' and its cognates are used to translate *hamartia* and its cognates in standard English translations of the New Testament. For a case for continuity between classical Greek and Christian uses, see Roberts, 2014. (With reference to the NRSV, Roberts observes that 'of the 269 occurrences of *hamartia* and its cognates in the NT, all but two (Acts 25:8 and 1 Peter 2:20) are translated as "sin"' (p. 356 fn 26).

²⁵ In a Kierkegaardian view, the case of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is in fact especially complicated. According to the essay on this play in *Stages on Life's Way*, *Hamlet* is in the end dramatically incoherent in virtue of the way that it hovers between the aesthetic perspective of the tragic and the religious perspective of human sinfulness. See *KW* XI, p. 453.

ethical self-doubt may be an issue for some, there is surely nothing very consoling in such religious doctrines as that we are all sinners, all in the wrong before God, all deserving His righteous punishment. The third objection stems from a worry from roughly the opposite direction: are religious appeals to human sinfulness really just a way of trying to let ourselves off the ethical hook?

Consider, then, the following line of response to our example of the embattled aid-worker, haunted by self-doubt. Either she really has done all that could reasonably have been asked of her, in which case her self-doubt is unwarranted; or she could reasonably have been expected to have done more, in which case her self-doubt serves only to disclose her own specific shortcomings, nothing about her ethical standing *qua* human.

In Kierkegaard's terms, we might describe this objection as reasserting the ethical against the religious. It may seem to gain traction from the principle: *ought implies can*. If the aid-worker could not reasonably have been asked to have done more, there is no reason for her to feel she should have done more. (Likewise, in this way of thinking, if the addict could not reasonably be expected not to relapse, she need not blame herself when she does.) Notably, however, this sort of appeal to *ought implies can* relies on what has been called its 'duties-restricting' reading: if I cannot ϕ then it is not the case that I ought to ϕ .²⁶ However, the principle can just as well be deployed *modus tollens*, i. e. on a 'capacity-expanding' reading: if I ought to ϕ , then I can ϕ . The possibility of this reading helps to explain why the anxiety of self-doubt gets its grip. Our aid-worker's anxiety is that perhaps she *should* have done more so that she therefore cannot rest secure in the supposition that she did all she could.

It is also salutary in this connection that Kierkegaard's preacher does not pretend to have a knock-down argument against the assertion of the stance in which, so long as 'one does what one can', with respect to what we ought to do, we are ethically in the clear. Rather, he appeals directly to experiences of anxious self-doubt in which this stance feels hollow and

²⁶ Martin, 2009, pp. 109ff.

unsustainable. If his listeners profess to have no familiarity with such anxiety, this preacher has nothing further to say.

What counsel does he offer for those who own such anxiety? Our second line of objection will help to bring this out. The objection might be put in this way: Kierkegaard underestimates the difference between the ideas of the tragic and of sinfulness. For, granted that the Greek tragedies explore ethically ambiguous dimensions of human life, this sharply contrasts with the Judeo-Christian doctrine of sin as transgression against God, wilful, defiant, culpable. Though it may be accompanied by consoling doctrines of grace and salvation, there can surely be no solace in the religious idea of sinfulness itself.

This objection raises doctrinal issues – touching on the relationships among original sin, specific sin and hereditary sinfulness – on which I shall not venture to pronounce. However, it is striking how Kierkegaard's preacher associates a kind of consolation with the very experience of coming to see oneself as sinful. Indeed, the overall theme of his sermon is the solace and 'upbuilding' to be found in the thought that 'before God we are always in the wrong'. Now, one might naturally wonder why this thought would not only aggravate the anxiety of ethical self-doubt. But the preacher insists that, on the contrary, the thought is apt not only to calm this anxiety but even to replace it with a kind of elation:

Then an end is put to doubt, for the movement of doubt consisted precisely in this: that at one moment he was supposed to be in the right, the next moment in the wrong, to a degree in the right, to a degree in the wrong... Thus every time doubt wants to trouble [a person] about the particular, tell him that he is suffering too much or is being tested beyond his powers, he forgets the finite in the infinite... because this thought, that he is always in the wrong, is the wings upon which he soars over the finite. This is the longing with which he seeks God; this is the love in which he finds God. (*Ibid*, p. 352)

Consider again our two paradigms of ethical self-doubt: the one who anxiously wonders whether she has done enough and the one who anxiously

anticipates her imminent relapse. Both might own a feeling of being tested beyond their ethical powers. But the preacher's thought is this: such anxious self-doubt can get its grip on us only when we take ourselves to be relatively powerful ethical agents, such that it is up to us to get things right. The doubts then well up: whether I have done all I could, whether I will succumb, whether in general I am up to the task, ethically. What can calm these doubts, the preacher wants us to see, is the thought that, before God, we are *never* up to scratch. Against the bar of infinite goodness and wisdom, all our finite strivings can only show up on a par, equally paltry. Paradoxically, the thought of our inadequacy before God can in this way be experienced as liberating, even the wings upon which a person might 'soar over the finite'.

The third objection arises at just this point. The worry is that, in the end, the religious perspective seeks an excuse for giving up on ourselves ethically. Does not the preacher's cure for anxious self-doubt boil down to a kind of lethargic fatalism? Is it not that since, before God, 'all our righteous acts are like filthy rags' (Is 64:6), we might as well give up trying to achieve anything in the actual world? In fact, he immediately intervenes to forestall just this sort of worry when he continues as follows:

In relation to God we are always in the wrong. But is not this thought anesthetizing... does it not vitiate the power of the will and the strength of the intention? Not at all! [S]hould not the thought that in relation to God we are always in the wrong be inspiring, for what else does it express but that God's love is always greater than our love? Does not this thought make [a person] happy to act, for when he doubts he has no energy to act; does it not make his spirit glow, for when he reckons finitely, the fire of the spirit is extinguished? (*Ibid*, p. 353)

To see the reasoning behind these rhetorical questions, consider again the case of the recovering addict, desperate to stay clean but anxiously anticipating a relapse. With specific reference to addiction, *The Concept of Anxiety* includes an astute little phenomenological sketch of just such anxiety as follows:

The occasion comes [sc. the temptation to relapse]; anxiety has already discovered it. Every thought trembles. Anxiety sucks out the strength of repentance and shakes its head. It is as though wrath had already conquered. Already he has a presentiment of the prostration of freedom that is reserved for the next moment. The moment comes; wrath conquers. (*KW* VIII, p. 116)

In short: by making it all the more salient, anxiously obsessing over the possibility of relapse becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. By contrast, the preacher thinks the perspective he associates with soaring over the finite can in fact spur us on ethically, by lifting our gaze away from our relative successes and failures. Paradoxically, he thinks, recognizing our general inadequacy before God can in this way be invigorating and empowering. (Notably, the preacher's counsel here closely approximates the methodology of twelve step programmes such as Alcoholics Anonymous, which seek to build up from a ground-level acknowledgement of the addict's powerlessness over an addiction.²⁷)

The more positive side to the preacher's counsel in this connection is the motivating power of love. He insists that the thought of being always in the wrong, before God, will be of no help to a person whatsoever if he merely assents to its truth. For it to be any help, this thought must instead be an expression of loving devotion. The preacher can therefore perfectly well agree that there is no solace to be found in cold or begrudging assent to a doctrine of human sinfulness – or, for that matter, of divine goodness. As embodied in the comportment of loving devotion, however, he maintains that the thought of oneself as sinful is so far from being enervating that it can become the very inspiration for action.

Still, we might press the question: why is seeing oneself as sinful supposed to help make one 'happy to act'? Even when joined with loving devotion, would not seeing oneself in this way lead instead to a wish either to draw back in shame or perhaps to lose oneself in impassive contemplation of the divine? I do not think Kierkegaard's preacher means to claim that sin-consciousness and love are jointly sufficient for the *vita activa*, under any

²⁷ For a full discussion, see Batho, 2017.

particular conception of the latter. His idea, rather, is of a specific form of liberation: from paralyses of self-doubt arising from experiences of ambiguous guilt. He envisages a condition in which a person's mode of self-assessment is so to speak no longer given over to deontic score-keeping: that is, the religious person is no longer dominated by the question of whether, and to what degree, she is (or may become) guilty of particular wrongs.

As in the case of the tragic, the thought of one's being always in the wrong before God is plainly not supposed to be exculpatory. Nonetheless, it is notable that the approach of Kierkegaard's preacher is guided by an underlying contrast between guilt, understood in a narrowly ethical way, and sinfulness, understood in a distinctly religious way. Seeing oneself as always in the wrong before God, on this account, means learning to live with the ambiguity of ambiguous guilt. In Kierkegaard's terms, the religious person exists before God, 'under the qualification: guilty/not-guilty' (*KW* XI, p. 463).

None of this of course is supposed to prove the objective validity of the religious. For all that the preacher shows, the perspective he depicts as a soaring over the finite may be but a consoling illusion. What Kierkegaard's work does provide – so I hope to have shown – is a case for the reality of ambiguous guilt. By the same token, this is a case for supposing we need to find *some* way to live with this reality. Moreover, as we have seen, the critical edge of Kierkegaard's view is sharpened by his sceptical stance toward modern ideals of rational self-determination. The last word here can therefore go to his aesthete:

It [sc. our modern age] is conceited enough to disdain the tears of tragedy, but it is also conceited enough to want to do without mercy. And what, after all, is human life, the human race, when these two things are taken away? Either the sadness of the tragic or the profound sorrow and profound joy of religion. (*KW* III.1, p. 146)

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Revolutionary Neighbor-Love: Kierkegaard, Marx, and Social Reform

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Abstract. In this paper we compare Kierkegaard's and Marx's views on social reform. Then we argue that Kierkegaard's own reasoning is consistent with the expression of neighbor-love through collective action, *i.e.* social reform. However, Kierkegaard's approach to social reform would be vastly different than Marx's. We end by reviewing several questions that Kierkegaardian social reformers would ask themselves. Our hope is that this exploration will provide helpful insights into how those who genuinely love their neighbors ought to seek the common good through collective action.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, Marx, social reform, neighbor-love, equality, worldly-dissimilarities.

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is not famous for his views on social reform. In fact, he has been sharply criticized for his noticeable lack of support for social reform. Contemporaneously, only a few hundred miles away, the philosopher best known for his views on social reform was at work: Karl Marx (1818-1883). These philosophers are infrequently brought into conversation, likely because their views are so opposed, but drawing a comparison between them can help highlight what a Kierkegaardian social reformer would look like if there were such a thing.

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In this paper we compare Kierkegaard's and Marx's views on social reform. Then we argue that Kierkegaard's own reasoning is consistent with the expression of neighbor-love through collective action, *i.e.* social reform. However, Kierkegaard's approach to social reform would be vastly different than Marx's. We end by reviewing several questions that a Kierkegaardian social reformer would consider: (i) What is the end-goal of social reform? (ii) Am I idolizing social reform? (iii) Am I presupposing love in others? (iv) Am I loving my enemies? It is worth noting that while Kierkegaard directed much of his work towards Christians, given his context in Christendom, there is no reason in principle why non-Christians could not agree with Kierkegaard on the importance of neighbor-love and its general precepts. Our hope is that this exploration will provide helpful insights into how those who genuinely love their neighbors ought to seek the common good through collective action.

Marx and Social Reform

A practical materialist¹ and atheist, Marx was “before all else a revolutionist.”² He envisioned communism as “the riddle of history resolved.”³ In his view, history can be characterized as the oppressed and oppressors in constant opposition to one another.⁴ The imminent communist revolution would eliminate this class struggle and would be made necessary by the changing economic forces of production.⁵ In Marx's early writings, he identified the major source of class conflict as the alienation of the proletariat from their labour by the capitalist means of production.

¹ Karl Marx, “The German Ideology”, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 169.

² Friedrich Engels, “Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx”, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 682.

³ Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844”, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 84.

⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 474 & 483.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 474.

Interestingly, he thought Christianity produced a similar effect: “Christianity... accomplished... the alienation of man from himself and from nature.”⁶ Though religious alienation was grounded in economic alienation, all modes of alienation would be abolished in communist revolution; then men could finally claim a *real* relation to themselves.

Marx claimed that German philosophy thus far had its metaphysics backwards. Their philosophy descended from heaven to earth, whereas Marx’s philosophy ascended from earth to heaven.⁷ He said, “We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process.”⁸ So, rather than seeing transcendent principles as foundational, Marx sees all of morality, religion, and metaphysics as *entirely* derivative of men’s material production and material intercourse.⁹ That is why the key was to alter the material economic forces of production; changes to the ideological superstructure would inevitably follow. Philosophizing, on its own, does nothing for us because it is merely the result of the material forces of production, that is why Marx claimed that the point of philosophizing is to change the world.¹⁰ Thus, social reform, *i.e.* revolution, is the primary objective of his philosophy.

The key to a successful revolution was to undermine the ruling class in every possible way. This would include forcibly overthrowing all existing social conditions, convincing the oppressed class of the hostility of their oppressors, and “support[ing] every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things.”¹¹ Many Marxists after Marx attempted to carry out this revolution. Unfortunately, this proved far more

⁶ Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 52.

⁷ Marx, “The German Ideology”, 154.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach”, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 145.

¹¹ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, 500.

difficult than Marx anticipated and resulted in millions of deaths. Yet, many are still hopeful that Marx's vision of social reform can come to fruition.

Kierkegaard's views on social reform are uninspiring by comparison. Kierkegaard and Marx were contemporaries in Europe, both raised Lutheran and well-educated in philosophy, especially in Hegelian and ancient Greek philosophy. Marx wrote his dissertation on Epicurus and Democritus,¹² while Kierkegaard wrote his dissertation on Socratic irony.¹³ It has even been recorded that Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* may have influenced certain people towards communism.¹⁴ Kierkegaard and Marx were both critics of Hegel in certain respects and, on certain points, that criticism coincided.¹⁵ However, their differences are more well known. Perhaps most obvious was that Kierkegaard was a devout Christian and Marx was an outspoken atheist.

Marx claimed, "The more a man puts into God, the less he retains in himself."¹⁶ He thought that the God-relationship alienated man from himself, and that this unnecessary mediation caused man to lack a real relation to himself. He thought that "God" was the result of man's objectification of his own essence by projecting it upon an "alien and fantastic being."¹⁷ Marx thought that man could truly become *himself* in communism. He claimed that the proletariat must overthrow the state in order "to assert themselves as individuals."¹⁸ The pursuit of social reform was directly tied to becoming one's true self.

This idea seems directly opposed to Kierkegaard's view of selfhood. For Kierkegaard, one can only become one's true self by relating to God. In *Sickness Unto Death*, the pseudonym Anti-Climacus famously gives an account of selfhood, saying that, "the self is a relation that relates itself to

¹² Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders, the Golden Age, the Breakdown* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 83.

¹³ William McDonald, "Søren Kierkegaard", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, last modified Winter 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kierkegaard/>.

¹⁴ Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 993.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1171.

¹⁶ Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts", 72.

¹⁷ Marx, "On the Jewish Question", 52.

¹⁸ Marx, "The German Ideology", 200.

itself.”¹⁹ In order to be a self, one must synthesize contrasting elements within oneself (*i.e.* the infinite and the finite, the temporal and eternal, freedom and necessity), and this requires that “a self must either have established itself or have been established by another.”²⁰ Since God is the only self that can establish itself, one must relate to oneself by relating to God. So, one becomes one’s true self by relating to God; otherwise one will relate to oneself through something else. These alternative things could be referred to as idols. Kierkegaard’s character “A” in *Either/Or Part I* is a model of one who lacks a true self. He is an aesthete who aims for his life to be a collection of satisfying, even though mostly tragic, moments. In a sense, he is completely alienated from himself. For Marx, one is alienated from oneself through the God-relation (as well as through certain other relations). So, for Marx we become our true selves through social transformation, and for Kierkegaard we become our true selves through God.

Kierkegaard and Social Reform

Kierkegaard’s position on social reform is often criticized as too complacent and conservative. He was explicitly against certain rights for women, and he claimed that worldly similarity (*e.g.* equal rights for men and women) is not the same as Christian equality.²¹ However, at the same time, he praised the abolition of slavery and several improvements in the treatment of women on Christian grounds.²² To investigate this tension, we must begin with an exploration of his concept of neighbor-love.²³

¹⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 139.

²² C. S. Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press on Demand, 2004), 215.

²³ We utilize an interpretation of Kierkegaard’s concept of neighbor-love that is more fully described in C. S. Evans’s *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*.

Works of Love explores the meaning of the command: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”²⁴ This divine command creates a moral obligation, grounded not in God’s power, but in God’s love and his desire for the good of mankind. Our fulfillment of this command results in the promotion of our own good and, ultimately, our happiness. Loving our neighbors might require self-denial, but this self-denial is surprisingly consistent with self-fulfillment. It is in denying ourselves and loving our neighbors that we can attain true happiness. Kierkegaard poetically writes, “to love people is the only thing worth living for, and without this love you are not really living.”²⁵

This becomes clear if we understand what it means to love one’s neighbor. What does love *do*? Love seeks the good of all, and the ultimate good of all is God.²⁶ So, neighbor-love, at the least, desires that everyone love, know, and find themselves in God. Of course, as embodied creatures there are other goods that we should seek to provide our neighbors as well, but none are more important than the ultimate good. Notice that one’s own self is not left out of the command: the command presupposes self-love. But the self-love that humans typically have is a selfish kind of love; this is not the type of love that ought to be extended to others.²⁷ We must love ourselves and others rightly by wanting the true good for us all. Kierkegaard puts this succinctly: “To love God is to love oneself truly; to help another person to love God is to love another person; to be helped by another person to love God is to be loved.”²⁸

The next question arises naturally: who counts as one’s neighbor? The answer is simply all human beings.²⁹ Human beings may look different, but each has a “common watermark” in the light of eternity.³⁰ God created

²⁴ Matthew 22:39 ESV.

²⁵ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 375.

²⁶ Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*, 178.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁸ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 107.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

all human beings, “placed love within them as their ground,”³¹ and gave them the capacity for love.³² Thus, every human being – every race, religion, sex, orientation, age etc. – is within the scope of neighbor-love, and no one can be excluded. The surprising and often offensive thing about this command is that it also applies to our enemies and to the wicked. This is a love that makes no distinctions, and yet it is not blind to distinctions.³³ In fact, one must account for individual differences in order to love others rightly. For example, one’s spouse is the recipient of one’s neighbor-love, but what this requires of one is vastly different from what neighbor-love might require of them with respect to a casual acquaintance.

But how could one possibly love *every* person in this way? Obviously, Kierkegaard does not expect us to reach out to several billion people. In fact, he thinks it is possible to satisfy the command of neighbor-love even if one were alone on a desert island.³⁴ How could this be? One answer is that the command to love is a command to develop an enduring emotion; such an emotion is a ‘concern-based construal.’³⁵ Today we often think of love as a ‘feeling’ or an ‘episodic emotion,’ something that comes and goes outside of our control.³⁶ Kant likely thought of emotions in this way, and that is why he thought we had duties to act *regardless* of our feelings.³⁷ Robert Roberts provides an account of emotion as a concern-based construal, which is a helpful way to understand neighbor-love.³⁸ He claims an emotion is a construal, which is a ‘seeing-as.’ So, with neighbor-love, we can choose to *see* our neighbors *as* creatures of God, made in his image, grounded in love, and with the potential for love. In other words, we can choose to see them as God sees them. Now, construing is not always under

³¹ Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*, 172.

³² *Ibid.*, 188.

³³ *Ibid.*, 178-179.

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 21.

³⁵ Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*, 190-191.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.

³⁸ Robert C. Roberts, “What an Emotion is: A Sketch”, *The Philosophical Review* 97, no. 2 (1988). doi:10.2307/2185261.

our immediate voluntary control, but we can take steps to construe in loving ways, *i.e.* we can cultivate a loving disposition.³⁹ If we understand neighbor-love in this way as a disposition, it makes sense that it could be commanded and accomplished, even without neighbors present. When we encounter actual people, this disposition will result in concrete loving actions. And one can have a disposition to love all those one encounters, though of course, one will not literally encounter every person.

Specific actions of love that ought to arise from this disposition can be made known to us through our individual callings. This might be through one's own giftings or desires,⁴⁰ or through geographical, logistical, or providential proximity.⁴¹ Notably, Kierkegaard thinks that some individuals' callings could be inconsistent with one another. For example, neighbor-love may call one person to buy a homeless person a meal, while it may call another person to walk past that homeless person but donate money to a homeless shelter. In any case, neighbor-love does not allow either person to regard that homeless person (or anyone else) as 'out-of-scope.' So, there is not a universally correct way of practicing neighbor-love for each person, but there is a universal call to love our neighbors.

Given that neighbor-love takes into account the distinctiveness of others, Kierkegaard thought neighbor-love was perfectly consistent with a hierarchical political structure.⁴² For example, one could recognize a king as someone whom they ought to honor, and as someone with special rights or powers, while also recognizing that the king is fundamentally equal as a neighbor. Here we begin to see why Kierkegaard's position on social reform could be seen as too conservative. It looks as though people could be ostensibly unequal (*e.g.* having different rights), while being equal in another, spiritual sense. Kierkegaard explicitly said, "worldly equality, if it were possible, is not Christian equality."⁴³ He thought Christianity

³⁹ Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 192.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 209.

⁴³ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 72.

“allow[ed] all the dissimilarities of earthly life to stand,”⁴⁴ and called people to lift themselves above these worldly dissimilarities.⁴⁵ This view can be seen in his push against equal rights for women and his lack of support for basically any social reform (e.g. reducing economic inequality).⁴⁶ And yet Kierkegaard praised past social reforms like the abolition of slavery and the improved treatment of women while attributing some of these improvements to Christianity.⁴⁷

We think that Kierkegaard’s own logic ought to have led him to see that social reform could be an important aspect of neighbor-love. Kierkegaard’s lack of enthusiasm for social reform stems, in part, from a conviction that support for social reform can be a cheap substitute for actually loving the neighbor.⁴⁸ In his time, Kierkegaard saw wealthy Danes who would not dare to be seen among the poor, but who were happy to condescend and contribute to their plight from afar.⁴⁹ These were people who lacked love in their concrete relations with others, and deceived themselves into thinking they were merciful and loving. Kierkegaard pushes back in the opposite direction by claiming that what is important is not social reform, but neighbor-love that is expressed in concrete ways with actual people.

Thus, Kierkegaard’s extreme position is at least partially explained by historical context. Moreover, the reasoning behind Kierkegaard’s support for the abolition of slavery and the improved treatment of women, would seem to support further social reforms as well.⁵⁰ While supporting ‘loving’ social policies is often a cheap substitute for actual neighbor-love, it does not follow that supporting loving social policies is *always* a cheap substitute for neighbor-love. Kierkegaard may be right to assume that there will always be some forms of worldly dissimilarity, and right in claiming that those who love their neighbors are called to rise above worldly dissimilarities.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁴⁷ Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*, 215.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁴⁹ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 75.

⁵⁰ Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*, 220.

However, it does not follow that we ought to be indifferent to every form of worldly dissimilarity.

Some worldly dissimilarities may be oppressive and possible to fix. Neighbor-love requires the lover to seek the other's good, and part of their good as embodied creatures includes bodily goods, like food and shelter. As social creatures, their good might also include social goods, like equal legal treatment or protection from coercion. To ignore the full spectrum of goods would be to ignore the uniquely multifaceted creatures that we are, and it would be a failure to love people as they actually exist. So, if there is a social policy that one can support that might reduce hunger and prevent starvation, it seems that neighbor-love could call one to support that policy. Likewise, if there is a policy that would protect others from racial discrimination, neighbor-love could call one to support that policy. Of course, there will be arguments about which policies are *actually* loving, but there is nothing in principle incoherent with neighbor-love calling one into collective loving action. Kierkegaard thought that, "[g]enuine neighbor-love... that contents itself merely with verbal declarations or support for general policies is suspect."⁵¹ However, we think that it is also true that "a love that shows no concern for collective, cooperative action is also suspect," and that Kierkegaard's own view of neighbor-love supports this.⁵²

Reflections for Kierkegaardian Reformers

So, if social reform is a viable outlet for expressing neighbor-love, how would Kierkegaardian reformers do so? We suggest several items that Kierkegaardian reformers would reflect on when approaching and engaging in social reform. They would (i) consider the end-goal, (ii) consider whether social reform is an idol, (iii) consider whether they are presupposing love in others, and (iv) consider whether they are loving their enemies.⁵³

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ This list is not intended to be exhaustive.

(i) The End-Goal

For Marx, the end-goal of social reform – *i.e.* revolution – was communism. Revolution was geared towards creating a classless society, where men could “become accomplished in any branch” of society they like, and they could “hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon... just as [they] have in mind.”⁵⁴ They would have more time for leisure, be perfectly equal, and finally enjoy their work. This was to be man’s true salvation. Striving towards a perfectly equal society is present in much of today’s political rhetoric, often tied up with the hope that through social reform we can eliminate suffering and evil: if only we could give humans the resources, then they would not steal; if only we could reduce inequality, then they would not covet; if only we did not repress sexual desires, then they would not quarrel etc.

Kierkegaardian reformers on the other hand, would recognize that a perfect earthly society is not the end-goal and is not possible. Unlike Marx, the Kierkegaardian will not see the political community as the means of salvation. Kierkegaard’s position can be summarized as follows: “Human efforts to transform human society can never be equated with the kingdom of God itself... [and] what is genuinely divine and transcendent cannot be identified with the temporal order without being fatally compromised.”⁵⁵ Kierkegaard claimed worldly similarity is not Christian equality, and furthermore he thought complete worldly similarity is impossible.⁵⁶ Surely in the presence of human imperfection, it is impossible for there to be a perfect earthly kingdom where all are perfectly equal. While this impossibility should not stop Kierkegaardian reformers from loving others through social reform, this harsh reality should cause them to reflect on the end-goal of their love. Neighbor-love ultimately wants the good for others. And while the good for embodied, social creatures certainly includes bodily and social goods, the fullest conception of the good is incomplete without the ultimate good, God. In other words, if one seeks to provide all manner of bodily and social goods to others, but not what ultimately brings about eternal

⁵⁴ Marx, *The German Ideology*, 160.

⁵⁵ Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*, 329.

⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 72.

happiness, one does not truly love. Kierkegaard reminds us that death is no misfortune in eternity, *i.e.* we all die.⁵⁷ So, Kierkegaardian reformers must ask: what am I helping people *for*?⁵⁸

(ii) Idolizing Social Reform

For Marx, there is a sense in which God himself is an idol. As mentioned earlier, Marx thinks we can develop a *real* relation to ourselves by eliminating the God-relationship, and we can do this through social revolution. If we change the material forces of production, we can usher in the age of communist humanity and develop real relationships with ourselves and the world. For Marx, the concept of God can keep us from becoming our true selves and prevent us from pursuing social reform.

Kierkegaardian reformers, on the other hand, would be careful not to allow social reform itself to become an idol. Earlier we mentioned Kierkegaard's view that one becomes one's true self by relating to oneself through relating to God. When one relates to oneself through something other than God, that thing can be called an idol. Thus, Kierkegaardian reformers would not relate to themselves through their "cause" as if this was the centre of their identity. When they pursue their cause, they would not mistake that cause for the true good, God; in other words, they would keep their priorities straight. It is common to see the opposite of this today: a lover may originally support a cause out of true neighbor-love, but eventually, after pursuing the cause intensely, they forget exactly how it is tied to their love for God and others. They cease to listen for their individual call and shut out other avenues for neighbor-love. The cause itself takes over their life and becomes an idol, in the sense that their identity and worth as a person is wholly

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁵⁸ An unsettling question could be asked here: Bodily goods often seem to be detrimental to one's pursuit of the true good, *e.g.* "It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." – Matthew 19:24 ESV. So, are there times when we ought to withhold bodily goods out of love for our neighbors? One could respond by distinguishing between bodily goods that are excesses and those that are necessities and claim that only excesses are detrimental to one's pursuit of the true good, but necessities are not. But we wonder if this is a satisfactory answer.

contained in the cause. While they began as true lovers of their neighbors motivated to engage in social reform, they may end up as social reformers who happen to love some of their neighbors. Kierkegaardian reformers would be wary of this temptation and attentive to changing and multifarious calls for their neighbor-love.

Kierkegaardian reformers will also be aware of the temptation to idolize the reputation of a social reformer. This is one of the things Kierkegaard disdained about his well-off contemporaries, the ones who championed policies to help the poor but did not want to be seen as equal to them in their actual lives. They loved the appearance of being social reformers but had no true neighbor-love. Today this temptation is exacerbated by social media. One can be recognized by thousands as a social reformer through a few clicks of a button. Again, intentions may start out genuine, but one can easily be pulled into comparison. A person might notice that others do not post on social media like oneself – that others do not ‘show support’ – and this can build one’s pride and give one a sense of a moral superiority. This feeling of praise and moral superiority can be addicting; so addicting, in fact, that the posting of ‘support’ on social media for one’s own gain now has its own name: “virtue-signaling.” Kierkegaardian reformers will be wary of this temptation and heavily weigh Jesus’ command not to “sound a trumpet” when giving to the needy.⁵⁹

(iii) Presuppose Love

Kierkegaardian reformers will consider Jesus’ rhetorical question, “Why do you see the splinter in your brother’s eye but do not see the log that is in your own?”⁶⁰ Kierkegaard’s interpretation of this verse is revealing. He thinks that it does not merely mean that we should not judge others, but that the “splinter, or seeing it judgmentally, *is a log*.”⁶¹ That is, seeing judgmentally *is* the log in one’s own eye. People often forget that God is omnipresent, and this forgetfulness allows them to have a false sense of security from which

⁵⁹ Matthew 6:2.

⁶⁰ Matthew 7:5.

⁶¹ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 382. (italics added)

to discover others' splinters. But Kierkegaard says, "At a moment when you really think God is present, it surely would not occur to you to see any splinter in your brother's eye or occur to you to apply this dreadfully rigorous criterion—you who are guilty yourself."⁶² If one is aware of God's presence, the last thing on one's mind would be the sins of others. One would be fearfully aware of their own sinfulness.

Considering this, what should our posture be towards others? Of course, we should love them as our neighbors, but Kierkegaard posits that neighbor-love requires that we "presuppose love in others."⁶³ Given that love is the source of everything⁶⁴ and God created humans with love as their ground, every human has the capacity to love. To love them is to "presuppose that love is in the other person's heart,"⁶⁵ and this presupposition builds up love in that person. Presupposing love entails, among other things, interpreting others' actions in charitable ways when possible and looking for mitigating explanations for their wrong actions.⁶⁶ Many of us have experienced how valuable this type of love can be. For example, here are two different postures a husband may have towards his wife when he feels like she is giving him the cold shoulder: With an unloving posture he may think (i) "I do not deserve this because I did not do anything wrong", (ii) "she is acting wrongly", or (iii) "I would never do something like this to her." These thoughts may build resentment or frustration in him and will likely affect his subsequent actions towards her. On the other hand, he could presuppose love in his wife, thinking, (i) "perhaps she is not actually giving me the cold shoulder and I have misinterpreted the situation", (ii) "perhaps I deserve the cold shoulder, did I hurt her in some way?", or (iii) "she must be tired from a long day." This latter reaction does not build up resentment, but mercy and humility. The husband's subsequent actions would then be coloured by his love for her, not his judgment. To love is to cultivate the disposition that sees love in others.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 383.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁶⁶ Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 165.

An apparent tension does arise at this point when we consider that the recognition of a wrong is sometimes loving. When there is a blatant wrong, the lover is not always called to make an excuse for it. For instance, if the husband *knows* his wife is having an affair with another man, he should not think, “they are probably just close friends.” To presuppose love is to have a posture that, *when possible*, construes others’ actions in a loving light. But in some cases, this is not possible because one cannot reasonably construe the actions in any other way – one cannot avoid the conclusion that a wrong has been done. On the other hand, it is indeed possible for the husband to construe his wife’s subtle reactions (e.g. the cold shoulder) in a loving way because they admit of various plausible interpretations.

In cases of clear unfaithfulness, abuse, or other obvious wrongs, it even seems *unloving* to make excuses for the perpetrator. Since love desires the good of the other, helping the other to recognize their wrong may be an important step towards their obtaining goods in life, particularly God. The husband may be enabling his wife’s unfaithfulness by feigning ignorance, which only allows her to drift further from life’s true goods. The true lover will recognize wrongs when they cannot reach any other conclusion and when it is loving to do so. But the important thing to notice is that the posture of presupposing love remains. Whether recognizing wrongs or thinking the best of someone, the true lover consistently maintains the disposition to presuppose love in others – they are not *looking for* wrongs.

The posture of presupposing love presented by Kierkegaard is fundamentally *anti-critical*. Kierkegaard says, “you have *nothing at all* to do with what others do unto you – it does not concern you... You have to do only with what you do unto others, or how you take what others do unto you. The direction is inward; essentially you have to do only with yourself before God.”⁶⁷ The true lover’s posture is not one that concerns itself primarily with the faults of others, but one’s own faults.

⁶⁷ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 383-384 (italics added). Given what is said in the previous paragraph we interpret Kierkegaard as speaking hyperbolically at this point. It is not possible or desirable to never have views about what others have done to you.

This posture is diametrically opposed to that of Marx and his followers. Marx thought that external criticism was a crucial method of advancement in history. In order to usher in revolution, the communists needed to encourage criticism. They must “everywhere support *every* revolutionary movement [not only the communist revolution] against the existing social and political order of things.”⁶⁸ It was not particularly important what these other revolutionary movements stood *for*, but what they stood *against*. The Marxist Antonio Gramsci said, “The cultural aspect, above all, will be negative, directed towards criticism of the past, obliterating it from memory and destroying it.”⁶⁹ This critique was not to be limited to the abstract system of oppression, but also to those who supported the system – it was vital for the masses to see them as the enemy. Marx said that the communists must never cease to “instill the clearest possible recognition of hostile antagonism between parties.”⁷⁰ It was crucial to make people as conscious as possible of the wrongs of the other side, to cultivate a posture of seeing antagonism in their actions. This would naturally instigate conflict and, ultimately, revolution. An aid to this project would be to encourage the oppressed class to see themselves as fundamentally distinct from the oppressor class. The oppressed class was to create a distinct culture of their own, with their own values, which the ruling class could not relate to, speak into, or appropriate for their own ends.

The posture of the Marxist was to seek to find the splinter in the other’s eye; this is how they thought progress was made. Kierkegaardian reformers will have a habit of seeing the best in others, even in their enemies. Also, they will not find their identity fundamentally in their dissimilarity. Kierkegaard said, “Each one of us is a human being and then in turn the distinctive individual that he is in particular, but to be a human being is the fundamental category. No one should become so enamoured of his

⁶⁸ Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 500 (italics added)

⁶⁹ Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 982.

⁷⁰ Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 500.

dissimilarity that he cravenly or presumptuously forgets that he is a human being.”⁷¹

(iv) Love one’s enemies

Lastly, Kierkegaardian reformers will love their enemies. When pushing for social reform, one will inevitably find new enemies. Almost every social reform policy has opposition today. One might support, say, government-funded universal healthcare, while others completely deny its importance, and still others disagree about how a policy should be implemented. It is easy to fall into the hostility that surrounds such issues. It has become the norm to demonize and humiliate those who oppose your views and to seek to eliminate their voice from the public domain. It is the norm to only see evil, ignorance, and hate in the actions of the opposition.⁷² And too often we seek only to win the issue rather than to win the person, but true love seeks to win the one who has been overcome and achieve reconciliation.⁷³

Of course, we must stand firm on our convictions and oppose unloving actions and policies – Kierkegaard says, “It would be a weakness, not love, to make the unloving one believe that he was right in the evil he did.”⁷⁴ But we also must seek to be reconciled to the opposition if we are successful. Kierkegaard says that as soon as we win the battle on a particular issue and hope to celebrate, religious consideration leads us into a new battle, a battle against self-righteousness and for reconciliation.⁷⁵ It is all too easy to feel morally superior when we win on an issue. And, often, the most satisfying moment is when the other side concedes; one is tempted to relish their repentance or confession. But Kierkegaard thinks that the true lover’s

⁷¹ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 141.

⁷² Here is an interesting thought: how many people who have supported a losing political candidate, can name a single praiseworthy thing the opposing political candidate accomplished during their term? It is terribly difficult to untrain our tendency to see the worst.

⁷³ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 337.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 338.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 333.

reaction would be to lay aside pleas for forgiveness in “holy abhorrence” as something not due to the lover, but to God.⁷⁶ The true lover does not want the other to feel that the lover is superior and will aim to prevent the humiliation of the other.⁷⁷ It is in this way that the lover is obeying the urgent command to seek to be reconciled.⁷⁸

Rarely do we see apologies in debates on social reform, but the dual aim of winning the issue *and* the person ought to change how Kierkegaardian reformers approach and interact with the opposition. Because they do not solely aim to win the issue, they will consider ways to support social reform while also preparing for the ‘second battle.’ Perhaps the reformer will shift their thinking from, “How can I beat them?” to “How can I help them understand?” This second question would require the reformer to seek to understand the opposition for themselves and convey things in ways that they could comprehend. Of course, this method should only be used to the extent that it is truly loving to do so – this will require discernment. For example, we expect that certain opponents (*e.g.* hate groups) cannot be reasoned with and that the most loving thing to do would be to push forward reform without engaging them until afterwards. But, in any case, the correct posture is love towards the enemy. The true lover will have the uncomfortable and somewhat offensive aim of winning over even the most wicked opposition. Kierkegaardian reformers may push for temporal goods in social reform, but they will also remember that there is an eternal good that can be provided to the souls of their enemies.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 341.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 341.

⁷⁸ “First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” – Matthew 5:24 ESV.

Conclusion

Kierkegaard is not known for his progressive views on social reform, but we think that Kierkegaard's own reasoning would imply that neighbor-love should support at least some movements for social reform. People may be called by neighbor-love to support certain social reforms, provided that their love is also expressed through concrete relations with others. The way a Kierkegaardian would pursue social reform is distinctive. It is in opposition to the most famous philosopher of social reform, Marx, and the many social reformers he influenced. Kierkegaardian reformers will remember that God is the true end-goal, and they will avoid the temptation to idolize reform. They will presuppose love in others with an anti-critical posture, and they will love their enemies. If true lovers pursued social reform in this manner, this would be nothing short of revolutionary.

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Book Review:

Flaviu Câmpean, *Identitatea melancolică la Søren Kierkegaard / The Melancholy Identity in Søren Kierkegaard*

(Școala Ardeleană & Eikon
Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca,
2020, 368 p.)



Flaviu Câmpean's book is the result of a long endeavour, both theoretical and practical, to comprise the ek-sistential scope of one of the affective dispositions which is constitutive not only for European modernity, but for each human being in particular. The author reveals how a vast cycle, both historical and thematic, closes with Kierkegaard. The historical and destinal beginning of melancholia in Greek tragedy is mirrored by the sublating creative function of its own void that the modern melancholia, and especially the romantic one, portrays. In this context, Kierkegaard stands out as a turning point, not towards something else, a "new meaning" for instance, but as an opening of a singular instant – *Øjeblik* – which temporalizes itself as a "pure" moment in an Aristotelian sense; moreover, not as a melancholic end of time but as a time of the melancholic end. The eschatological implications of this concept are otherwise well pointed out by the author. In this frame, the Freudian death drive finds its closest anticipative analogue. The centre of this ek-sistential "establishment" is otherwise a new form, of "living the mortification" of the unique – *den Enkelte* –, a kind of dead immortality, as the author calls it by paraphrasing Jean Starobinsky. Or, the unique itself cannot be an object or a subject of discourse, and for this reason Kierkegaard's position pertains neither to a speculative idealism, nor to a

phenomenological realism, overcoming both in the indetermination of its origin and end.

Flaviu Câmpean's hypothesis, which I think was influenced by his work in our seminar of psychoanalysis in Cluj, is that the Kierkegaardian melancholia refers to a pre-structural and therefore pre-discursive moment, whose function can be precisely reduced to the effect of the original division of the subject. A division that predates any psychic structure while also conditioning it – nothing more, nothing less. The instant thus corresponds, almost simultaneously, with the experience of the inaccessibility of the “religious truth” and, consequently, with the possibility of a *sui generis* atheism which, while constitutive for the 1800s paradigms, finds its full relevance in the event of coming into the world. From this perspective the cut of the original division protects the subject of any possible (and future) entrapment in a primary narcissism and represents, through the original position that the subject has with regards to the Origin as such, the condition of one's own “unary trait”. This is also the reason for which, as pointed out by the author, Kierkegaard's essential contributions need to be delimited, in principle, from the question of his own subjective structure that could be interpreted by the psychoanalytic discourse. Nevertheless, if one could touch the latter, the conclusion is that Kierkegaard's concrete symptomatic solution doesn't add up to a new dialectics which would be more inspired in its finalities than the Hegelian one, but to a certain writing, which occurs *after and not during* – even less before – the mortificatory pain specific to the subjective division. To put it more exactly by paraphrasing Jacques Lacan's concept of *sinthome* relating to James Joyce, it is a “sinthomatic” writing (*i.e. scription*) of what was “previously” glimpsed, in and through the unique way of in-scription of the Origin itself. Therefore, if language is said to be the mark of a lack, the Kierkegaardian melancholia is the “lack of a lack” (*manque du manque* in Lacan) that precedes the entrance of the divided but unstructured subject into language.

Moreover: as a founding original experience, the last melancholia, the one for which the discourse itself loses its otherwise illusory sublimation

function, becomes the vanishing point of any situation within the imminence of death, a death that is “alive” and, moreover, the only one that can offer an own body. This is, according to the author, related to what Kierkegaard calls the “hysteria of the Spirit”, the single form of the *sinthome* within the body of whatever overcomes any discourse and any other possible symptoms of conversion. Thus, the only body that Kierkegaard links to this in-scription is the writing itself, a body made out of letters, and it is only in this sense that a clinical melancholy of the subject Kierkegaard can be approached. From this perspective of the *sinthome*, Flaviu Câmpean relates the melancholic experience with both the end of the aesthetic fantasy and with that of the ethical one, anticipating the kenosis of the Spirit. Here, he astutely emphasizes the difference between the recurrent repetition, more or less tautological, and what the repetition of the instant brings about in the interval between the beginning and the end of such a melancholic journey.

The interest of this approach is not an anamnesis which would remain suspended between past and present but a stabilization of the instant as an ek-static experience. In other words, the goal is to regain the instant of the original opening (of the Origin that opens itself), but this time not as a failure. The verb *chaino*, that gave the word *chaos* (a vertiginous anarchy that attracts the subject in the vertigo of a bottomless and foundationless collapse), doesn’t necessarily engender a destructive meaning because it can support the kenosis of the third one – namely of the Spirit itself –, for which there is no more melancholic mourning and which escapes any strict clinical definition of neurosis, of conversion hysteria.

Virgil Ciomos

