

**TRANSFIGURATIONS:  
The Intimate Agency of Death**

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*What is the essence of night,  
if not lack, need, and longing?  
-- Schelling<sup>1</sup>*

**I.**

Mid-way through his fluid meditations in *Moby Dick*, Melville presents us with a particularly hair-raising incident. A 14th Century British commander has conquered a French town and demands his fair tribute in victory. He asks for six citizens to step forward to be hanged. The mayor and five others come forward with halters around their necks. This fright snaps us alert -- not just to cruelty, but to our mortality. And within a page, Melville assures us that the philosopher contemplating death can be as transfixed and transformed as anyone mounting a gallows. We all live, as he puts it, with halters around our necks.<sup>2</sup>

Melville has us aware of our own halters by delivering us to the terror of others -- not unlike Kierkegaard's giving us the terror of Abraham, knife drawn, to incite our own worries about faith in the man. These occasions can snap us awake the way imminent danger can, but we would hope to learn more than naked fear through these encounters.<sup>3</sup> The philosopher is

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<sup>1</sup> *The Deities of Samothrace, (Über die Gottheiten von Samothrake, 1815)*, trans. and intro. R.F. Brown, Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Melville, Herman *Moby Dick, or The Whale* with commentary by Tom Quirk (London: Penguin, 2001) Ch. 60, "The Line" p.305f.

<sup>3</sup> Death might seem to be a bare if ineluctable fact, like sunlight or nutrition. You might think that it assumes a moral significance only in the matrix of social life, say, as we consider threats, assault, or murder. But there's a wider angle, one from which Plato names the philosophical way of life, the moral

one intimately familiar with death, if we listen to Socrates, someone who in fact “practices” death, or practices being with it, and learns through that intimacy that death is nothing to fear. If Kierkegaard agrees that a philosopher, or writer of consequence, should be intimate with death (and he seems to believe this), what does death teach – and how?

I want to sidestep the possibility that it teaches only fear and trembling – *only* that – and consider how it teaches through doing, through its agency, an agency in which we are its intimate partners. What it accomplishes is transfiguration. It doesn’t pass on a consolatory thought about the next life or a glimpse of a hereafter. Kierkegaard is emphatic: “*Then all is over!*” (TDIO, 71).<sup>4</sup> But if death is not a door to an afterlife, it’s a most important teacher and mentor, a disturber of selves and minister to souls in *this* life. Death teaches by invasion, by revelatory restructuring of the attentive soul.<sup>5</sup> It arrives as a transforming jolt, not unlike the impact of lightning or thunder in their unmistakable eruptions. The impact seems “sublime” - - powerfully transfixing and transforming, momentous; but is perhaps not exactly “sublime” to the extent that the upshot of this jolt is a *moral* change.

In the discourse “At a Graveside”, Kierkegaard speaks ominously (and opaquely) of death’s *decision*. Perhaps its decision is its demand on the remainder of our lives, a judge’s sentence, as it were, but indeterminate – “*Wake up! (. . . but do what?)*”. Its decision (or momentous decisive intervention) instills moral earnestness. Things *matter*. One must take up the matter of one’s life, and lose not an instant! By its visceral intrusion one is snapped awake to the contingency of life, but also to its openness as a field of our serious moral

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or ethical life, as not only a path of virtue, but also, enigmatically, a practice of death. When Kierkegaard names death as life’s dancing partner, he may, like Plato, be suggesting that the best life will involve virtue and also a ‘lively awareness’ of death.

<sup>4</sup> *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*

<sup>5</sup> *Philosophical Crumbs* gives an extended treatment of the way non-Socratic learning occurs through the invasive, restructuring of revelation. See *Kierkegaard’s Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*, ed. with introduction, Edward F. Mooney, trans. M.L. Piety, Oxford World Classics, 2009.

endeavor. We don't put off what needs to be done. As Kierkegaard puts it, "the thought of death . . . *accelerate(s) the living*". (TDIO, 83) "Earnestness (or seriousness) grasps the present *this very day*" (TDIO, 83).

Something is captured by the image of death's intrusion as a transfiguring verdict – say, a decision that transforms our life. I will return several sections ahead to Kierkegaard's figuring this moment as "death's decision." I'd like to consider now a way that he figures death that is less joltingly transformative – but transformative nonetheless. He speaks in several places of a dance with death, or with the thought of death. In *Philosophical Crumbs*, he sees his dialectical writing that way, as "a dance with the thought of death".<sup>6</sup> A striking image, but what can it mean? Will the shrouded figure of death pull me gently into the pit? Seeing a man grieving at a graveside, Kierkegaard avers, "death invites him also to the dance" (TDIO, 87). It's a commonplace that one should confront rather than flee the idea of one's death, but Kierkegaard has something more intimate in mind. A dance is an image of relationship that is non-confrontational and even pleasantly inviting, mutually satisfying. How can that be? Well, perhaps Kierkegaard anticipates that the dance will transfigure the dancer. If so, then a tone that is amorous or at least intimate and embracing seems apt.

## II.

In *Concluding Unscholarly Postscript*, Johannes Climacus pictures Socrates dancing.<sup>7</sup> Unlike the image from his earlier *Philosophical Crumbs or a Crumb of Philosophy*, the dance is not with death -- at least not *explicitly*. But before we conclude that in *Postscript* a dialectical

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<sup>6</sup> *Crumbs*, p. x [in the new Oxford World Classics trans., which uses 'Crumbs' [rather than 'Fragments'] it's p. 87; in the Swenson trans., it's p. 7

<sup>7</sup> *Postscript*, p. 89 "Socrates is a solo dancer before the divine". I thank Paul Muench for this passage.

dance is something else than a dance with death, we should consider that Kierkegaard might hold an unstated assumption. After all, it's *Socrates* who is dancing in *Postscript*.

Socrates devotes his life to philosophy, and philosophy, as we learn in the *Phaedo*, is a preparation or rehearsal for death [64-a]. This must mean that through one's reflective practice, one comes to terms with the idea and reality of death. Socrates dancing might well be Socrates practicing his dialectic, thinking in a rehearsal for death. And if death is on his mind as he dances, we are not far from his dancing with the thought of death. This brings him appropriately close to the image Climacus provides in *Crumbs* of his *own* dialectical practice. Climacus and Socrates are ever so close.<sup>8</sup> Climacus declares a dancing Socrates, securing the intuition that a worthy Socrates will be more than a thinking dialectical head. He'll enact a flowing, embodied artistry that somehow is the expressive equivalent of dialectic, and an expressive outpouring of a life-in-the-presence-of-death. But I've left out a crucial part of the *Postscript* image.

Climacus figures Socrates in a solo dance before *the divine*.<sup>9</sup> This might mean that Socrates' dance is subject to correction by his *daimon*, the god or divine voice who watched over him. Or perhaps Climacus renders the holiness of the dance, the holiness of Socrates' performance, by placing it 'under the eye' of God (or the god). In any case, dancing before the divine is no doubt doing an agile stint of philosophy in the most earnest of circumstances, with death in mind and in heart's intimate embrace. Climacus does not have Socrates *say* anything. He strikes up no conversations or interrogations with divinity or anyone else. He is 'solo', as Climacus has it. But then, in *Phaedo* and *Apology* it is Socrates' calm composure and steady postural conviction (as much as any words he utters) that convince us – or many of

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<sup>8</sup> This brings Socrates (and Climacus) close to Nietzsche. Nietzsche would admire a 'music playing Socrates', [Birth of Tragedy: sec 15 & 17] and a 'God who would dance'[Zara'on read & writing']

<sup>9</sup> The translation is sometimes given, 'before the god.'

us -- of his philosophical merit, of the wisdom of his convictions and way of life. If philosophy is a way of life it can be also a way of dance.

The Preface to *Philosophical Crumbs* ends with the striking image of a dance with the thought of death. Thereafter, however, the motif strangely disappears, not even raising a rustle as a sub-textual undercurrent. But perhaps we should expect this relative disappearance. The philosopher can't make death the single explicit focus of argument because life -- *his* life -- is infinitely varied in scope, and there are just too many other topics to canvas. If the philosopher thinks of death, Kierkegaard seems to intimate in "At a Graveside", the effect is not a *dwelling* on death. The effect is to revitalize or 'accelerate' *life*. Death is a reminder that our time is not infinite, and apparently Kierkegaard thinks, at least in *Crumbs*, that that fact, once it is adequately absorbed, need not be considered explicitly every moment.<sup>10</sup> One gets on with what one has at hand – what is far closer than 'at hand'. One gets on with what is there to own and to realize, to take up with, intimately, what is there for a time as one's life.

To experientially focus life's contours *this* side of death, if one is Plato, is to improve one's insight, for instance, into beauty, friendship, or justice. And if one is Climacus, to focus the contours one is experientially immersed in is to improve one's insight into revelation, the public, earnestness, or subjectivity. Getting these matters in focus gives one a kind of rest or stability that makes life livable, to the extent that circumstances permit. In turn, this makes

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<sup>10</sup> Patrick Stokes helpfully points out that Climacus seems to hold that the thought of death *will be* something to think "every moment": [CUP1:166]. There seem to be a number of thoughts that "stand at the ready" every moment even though they are not the explicit focus of my attention: for example that I love my child, or will be loyal to my best friend. There is never a moment when those 'standing thoughts' are impertinent and they may very well come to explicit awareness (if not into focused consideration) several times a day. Climacus' point is that if I only think of my death (or that I love my child, or that I will be loyal to my friend) once a year, on the anniversary of my father's death, or on my child's birthday, or when my friend is tested, then this is hardly "thinking one's death, or of one's child, or one's friend" in the rich sense that is necessary. As I would put it, it must "stand at the ready" every moment.

death sufferable, makes her -- our sense of mortality -- even our amorous partner.<sup>11</sup> And as it runs beneath the surface of explicit thinking and doing, one takes heart from the thought that “*death in earnest gives life force as nothing else does*” (TDIO, 83).<sup>12</sup>

### III.

Toward the end of *Poor Paris!': Kierkegaard's Critique of the Spectacular City*, George Pattison reflects on the unfolding of life from an enigmatic beginning to an enigmatic finale. Reflecting on my life from the middle of it, I'm aware, at least ideally, of death ahead. But Pattison speaks also of the under-discussed darkness of birth behind. [u1]

What links a sense of my death with a sense of my birth is my sense of a loss of continuity. Stability and confidence in an orientation from the middle of life depend to some great degree on seeing expectations of tomorrow joined to events past, seeing, to the extent possible, continuities among friends, places of inhabitation, cultural styles, economic- and life-possibilities. But that yearning for continuity is defeated by the limit conditions of life itself. As Pattison puts it, I lose continuity “with the life that bore my life”<sup>13</sup> – as if birth were the breaking of a primal bond. And looking forward, as I realize that others will die, that *all* are born “with halters around their necks,” I lose continuity with the longer span of life I project as a continuation of the present and the near past. But if continuity is broken behind and ahead, what is my hope for a sustainable, sufferable sense of time's reliability?

The awareness of the limit conditions of birth and death has a pervasive underground presence in our lives. Pattison puts it this way:

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<sup>11</sup> As Adam Buben points out, sometimes *I* lead in my *tete à tete* with death, and sometimes death seems to lead. In either case, I am actively *and* passively involved, continually, until “All is over!”

<sup>12</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>13</sup> Pattison, George *Poor Paris! Kierkegaard's Critique of the Spectacular City* (Berlin: de gruyter, 1999) p.140.

The primal loss of continuity with the life that bore my life and the final loss of self in death mark out boundaries that are reinforced by the repeated experience of the births and deaths of others. Both this retrospective primal loss and prospective final loss are implicated in every important life-decision that I make, because they fundamentally condition my sense of life and my sense of myself as belonging or not belonging to it.<sup>14</sup>

Now what interests me here is *whatever must underlie the bare possibility* of a sense of loss of life, a primal loss shadowed before and ahead.

I can never have directly experienced, as an actual event, even a powerful event-of-loss, the breach between my present life, now, and either the life that bore me or the life that departs me in death. So how can something that I never experience as an event have such a profound and pervasive effect on my sense of life? The answer must be that *of course* death affects me profoundly -- but *for me, my death*, paradoxically, is not an event that I can hold up to scrutiny but something that affects me nevertheless.<sup>15</sup> After all, it is not only events that affect me deeply. A sense of promise or failure, of impending doom or celebration, can suffuse my life, and these moods are not events or sets of events. I experience the blow of life's loss perhaps as the *looming* (or scream or whisper) of something that will knock me down. It's that dark *aura* that jolts me awake. Or perhaps I experience life's loss as a mood, an aura of mourning or melancholy that drifts forward from an indistinct time I crave, a time before I was born. This shrouded or luminescent looming, ahead or behind, associated with loss, is made palpable to the senses. It colors our sense of where and what we are, they way

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<sup>14</sup> Pattison *Poor Paris!* p. 140.

<sup>15</sup> See Wittgenstein, Ludwig *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* trans. C.K. Ogden (Routledge: London, 1996), p. 185, on death as not something I live through.

overarching moods do. It gives to the deep future and the deep past a deep impact on the present. Posthumous time and pre-natal time have an enigmatic, intimate agency in my life. A dance with death might be a dance with those times, shadowed as mood.

To ask how it comes about that a sense of my *own* death or birth is inflected by loss is not the historian's question. The historian will consider how the deep past leaks into the present, and how expectations of the future can leak back from a sense of what lies in store to condition widely shared cultural and political institutions and general sensibilities about the human condition. To consider my own past (my birth) or inevitable future (by death) cannot be achieved by taking a detached, patrician overview of a field, but must be an intimate, personal venture. And perhaps not everyone will have the sense that "my *own* death or birth is inflected by loss". The discussion thus far presupposes that I care about where I am in the midst of life, and care about my death and birth (and yours).<sup>16</sup> Yet it may seem that I just do not care about my own birth and death, or care about the loss associated with each. That will not entail that I have a cold heart, or would just as soon die, for I might care intensely about the birth and death of my children (say) or a friend -- even while neglecting my own. Conversely, I might be relatively indifferent to the births and deaths of others, and whatever loss might be implicated in these, but intensely interested in what Pattison calls the separation from primal life associated with my birth and in the separation associated with my death. To the extent that such indifference to others becomes pervasive, this seems to subtract from the *moral* gravity of my concern. Awareness of my mortality may be only loosely connected with moral care -- though we might wish it were otherwise.

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<sup>16</sup> One thinks here of Heidegger's picture of human life being a structure of care and tilted toward death.

What do mortality (and natality) add to our sense of care (if we have it)? For one thing, beyond native care, they bring to the fore our strange but familiar capacity to think forward and backward from where we are, to think of ourselves as we would be, forward and backward from where we are. I must have the gift to occupy two standpoints, two postures, at once. How does this work?

To dance with death, or my mortality, I need to shift out of my present position and imagine that I occupy a quite different position. In his moving discourse, “At a Graveside”, Kierkegaard says that everything depends on the position we take toward our death. I might mourn the life lost at death, or rejoice that life’s sufferings have ceased, but underlying any thought about my death is the possibility that I step aside from my life *this moment* to imagine, as it were, leaving life, or looking back from the other side.<sup>17</sup> So if Pattison is correct, I need to think of myself as separate from myself -- for instance, as separate from the life that bore me and *was* once mine, and separate from the night that will claim me and *will* be mine. *Then all is over!*”, as Kierkegaard has it.

Apparently I can not only *wish* or *long* for the transgression of temporal limits -- wishing to live in another century, for instance, or in the wholeness of an Eden behind. I can actually speak – or *seem* to speak – from a position whose attainment *enacts the transgression* of temporal limits. This gives the standpoint of the deep past or the deep future agency over my present.

A condition of Job’s being able to curse the day he was born is his capacity to imaginatively project himself to a time before he was born, and (quite enigmatically) speak and think and imagine from that emptiness. And he resolves that he doesn’t want to pass over

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<sup>17</sup> See Connell, George “Four Funerals: The Experience of Time by the Side of the Grave”, in Perkins, Robert L. (Ed.) *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Prefaces/Writing Sampler and Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006) pp.419-438

into life. Similarly, a condition of Achilles' being able to rue the day he will die is his capacity to imaginatively project himself to a time after death when he will enigmatically speak and think and imagine (ruefully) from that emptiness. And he resolves that he fiercely does *not* want to pass out of life.

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We have traveled some distance from the gritty side of death, the sort of realization that Melville brings us – that death can be ugly, and in any case, comes to all, come what may, and is not at all something to tenderly embrace in a dance. The gritty side of death has its own agency. It can bring us to fright, but also to humility, or to compassion, or to courage. It can bring us to raise memorials, or to the affliction of cynicism, or to a mournful sense of pervasive tragedy and pain in human life. In these ways a gritty, visceral and widening sense of the deaths of others (often in unspeakably violent and unconscionable circumstances) can move us and transfigure our lives.

Beside the gritty encounter there is the serenely contemplative prospect on death. Josiah Royce at the close of his life, when he knew unmistakably that he was dying could write rather objectively, “So long as love and memory and record and monument kept the thought of our own dead near to our lives and hearts, [it] will be an unfailing source to us of new and genuinely religious life.”<sup>18</sup> And then there is the prospect of death as terrible sublime. As Thoreau has it, “[Death] has all the attributes of sublimity – Mystery, Power, Silence – a sublimity which no one can resist, which may be heightened, but cannot be equaled, by the thunder’s roar, or the cannon’s peal.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> James Harry Cotton, *Royce on the Human Self*, Harvard, 1954, p. 7. I thank David Rodick for this passage.

<sup>19</sup> Thoreau, Henry David *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Early Essays and Miscellanies* ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer and Edwin Moser (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 1976) p. 93.

Kierkegaard engages the shadows of death neither from the side of its grittiness nor from a vantage of noble serenity, nor from the sort of sublimity to which Burke or Thoreau appeal. He speaks, in the discourse at hand, of death's decisiveness, its enigma, its capacity to instill earnestness, its being something the thought of which one could dance with. Unlike Melville or Tolstoy, for instance, he does not directly engage the horrors of brutal death that are so much a part of public attention and expressions of distress in high and low culture and the media. Instead he highlights our temporality, and how it instills moral urgency, in ways we've begun to sort out.

If we are to have the sort of significant way with death that Kierkegaard pursues, we have to project forward in time,<sup>20</sup> and from that vantage, project back in time to assess and narrate what precedes that posthumous time. This is a capacity to be *here* -- and simultaneously temporally *elsewhere*. That formulation sounds convoluted enough that we may suspect a kind of illusion, or trick, or unfortunate knot in our thinking, waiting to be untied. But let me make this sense of being here and elsewhere more familiar by exploring two related capacities: our capacity to "step into another's shoes", and our capacity to be both temporally *and* spatially here and elsewhere.

#### IV.

It's a commonplace that to become morally aware we must learn to see and feel things the way another person sees or feels them, to "step into their shoes", as we say. Now perhaps that's just a metaphor, but I don't think so. I may not actually wait to slip into your house and slip into your shoes, picking the loafers that fit. Nevertheless, there's nothing "*merely*

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<sup>20</sup> See Connell "Four Funerals" p.433 on posthumous recollective anticipation and p.434 on anticipatory non-recollection.

metaphorical” in my saying that I step into your shoes when I try to adopt your perspective, empathize with it, see things from your standpoint.<sup>21</sup> I actually do that!

Let’s just say it’s a non-metaphorical truth that moral maturity requires being able to step into another’s shoes. The relevance to death is this. If I try to see my life backward from the shadow that is death, it’s like stepping into the shoes of death and looking back at the world – my world – from that shadowed position. I transport myself temporally, as it were, just as I transport myself spatially to slip into the shoes of another. It is a most important (shadowy) capacity to be where I am and also in your shoes, and it’s a most shadowy capacity to be when I am now and also in death’s shoes, looking back on life from the position of death, dancing with my other, slipping into the shoes of death even as I stay in my own.

Most of Pattison’s “*Poor Paris!*” deals with Kierkegaard’s spatial locations, within and at the edges of what he calls “the spectacular city”. Paris, or Copenhagen, becomes an overarching spectacle containing an endless array of minor and major spectacles. The space of spectacle is the space of see and be seen, of excitement and disorientation. In a minor way, even his large family home on Nytorv was there to be seen and admired, declaring its massive importance to the market square it overlooked; and perhaps the interior had spaces for minor spectacles -- a drawing room to be seen and see in, to dress up in, with strict protocol governing who was to be seen and heard by whom and when and about what. But the more obvious sites of spectacles were the bustling streets for all classes and types, including *flaneurs* and flirts, streets that Kierkegaard frequented as an avid conversationalist and observer. And there were the woods and parks newly designed for carriage rides (one makes

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<sup>21</sup> It’s merely churlish to insist on saying “*It’s . . . as if . . . I ‘stepped in your shoes’.*” If I say “*I see what you mean,*” I don’t need to add “*It’s . . . as if . . . I ‘see what you mean’.*” An “as if” suggests a second best path to apprehension, but there’s nothing second best in using the locution, “I see what you mean”, or “I step into your shoes.”

a spectacle of oneself, waving to others as they wave to you, dashing by in contrary directions). And these were places for viewing the King in his majesty out on his daily row on the lake, visible to all and sundry. Then there were the churches Kierkegaard entered for worship, or the university with the buzz or drone of lectures. Each space he entered and took in had interiors and exteriors, and each could appear under endlessly varying aspects.

Although these spaces were in one sense separate, they also were conjoined, or stacked one on another, in imagination, but in reality, as well. Amidst the drone of university lectures, Kierkegaard, like any student, might be more or less asleep to that space -- yet quite alive in that moment to the space of carriage rides in verdant parkland, vivid in his mind's eye. Or he might be swept by the sobriety of worshipers in Vor Frue Kirke, a space he frequented on Sundays. Yet like any worshiper, he might find his grip on that space failing him as a far more lively space intruded, the exciting space, for example, of a lively room some blocks away filled with conversation -- with a pert and pretty girl he fancied.

Considering the way spaces can be conjoined or stacked gives us a background for grasping the strange business of seeing our own death, or dancing with the thought of death -- of seeing our life from beyond the grave, from the standpoint of death. When spaces are stacked, the ambiguity of spatial location sinks in. It's not clear *where* he is. Is Kierkegaard -- definitively and exclusively -- in university lecture halls (and hence clearly *not* on a carriage ride)? Or is it the other way around: Kierkegaard is definitively and exclusively on a carriage ride (and *not* in a classroom)? We often speak with conviction (say, as classroom teachers), from one vantage or the other, in one locution or the other. Words leap to the tongue. "You're *here* -- don't be *there!*" Or equally, "your're *there*, come back *here!*" This

ambiguity testifies to our spatially anomalous existence. Kierkegaard is on a carriage ride and equally in class, and flirting in living rooms and equally in church.

Thoreau calls the creatures that crab back and forth with the tide “anomalous creatures”, for they belong partly to the sea and partly to the land. They belong really to both (and to neither). Just so, projecting myself back into the time before I was born, or forward into the empty space after I have lived, lets me belong both to the night before and the night after. And since I am here, as well, I really belong to both and to neither.

## V.

I suspect that both life and death (not to mention hurt or turmoil or love) are, in a deep sense, anomalous. Anomalous results in science are facts that beg to be explained by new paradigms or laws. Life and death are not anomalous in *that* way. They are anomalous because they do not seem to fall against any sort of non-local, global background, an uncontested “normative” background against which their shape-shifting can be unambiguously charted. There is no perfectly general grid on which to chart their comings and goings. That is, there is no “nomos” or overarching pattern to life or death or hurt. They are *anomalous* – while being crucially determinative features of human being and becoming.

Specific backgrounds that fix the play for death or life are local and diverse. If the background for fixing “death” is the field of coroners or county clerks, death can for the most part be figured unambiguously. It’s an event fixed securely in clock or calendar time. “Life ceased at 12:01 AM: period!” But if the background in play is the work of cultural critics, then another meaning of “time of death” will become pertinent. Kierkegaard may be dead for the coroner yet for the critic, alive in *my* generation, well past the coroner’s declaration. The

coroner's context is not the only game in town. So the coroner's announcement of death lies strangely idle. One's estimate of Kierkegaard's cultural life may be also unfixed: will he be alive fifty years from now? As a matter of cultural importance, Kierkegaard may be still in his youth. The grid operative for cultural critics can seem to undermine the grid operative for county clerks, and vice versa. Of course the meaning of "*the* time of Kierkegaard's death" has radically shifted, but that's exactly my point.

Yet again, the background in play (as we try to chart life or death) might be neither the backdrop of cultural history nor the practices of county clerks. It might be the arena of family dynamics. If this third context is operative, then perhaps Kierkegaard's death leaps over his burial and invades the life of his older brother. Søren's death lived within Peter as a toxin bringing on *Peter's* death (or his death-in-life), years before Peter's clerk-registered burial.<sup>22</sup> After Søren's early death, Peter would live for decades more, ever more aware of his having failed his younger brother (so it seems). As Søren's life grew and grew (*after* his burial), Peter's diminished and diminished (*before* his -- Peter's -- burial). Peter resigned his high place in the state church hierarchy, and later resigned his claim to competency as a person, placing himself in the hands of the state, so deep was his melancholy, so far had Søren's death become his.

To call death anomalous is to note the large set of possible meanings to "death," each presupposing a background against which judgments are made, none particularly congruent

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<sup>22</sup> See Hannay, Garff. John Thoreau dies of lockjaw in his brother Henry's arms; a few days later, Henry takes on all the death agony and symptoms of John; later still Henry writes a memorial to John, *A Week on The Concord and Merrimack*. – Again, maybe we could put in a reference to one of the standard bios of Thoreau on HDT's 'sympathetic lockjaw' incident? (e.g. Walter Harding's *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, Robert D. Richardson's *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* etc.); I don't have either of these with me in DK but I'll see if I can rustle one up from somewhere.

with the others.<sup>23</sup> Does coroner's report, critics' evocation, family drama, or some other context take precedence?<sup>24</sup> There is no "mother of all contexts," no "map of all maps." We are, in some fundamental sense, flying without maps (if not flying blind) at this excessively high level of generality where we sense how easily the thought of death becomes fluid, amorphous, anomalous. We can descend, however, and luckily, to follow our schooled second nature and inherited intuition to get around without crashes or collisions; yet a mystery, something enigmatic, haunts our tracks.<sup>25</sup>

*When* death shows up will depend on who, locally, is keeping track, and on what locale we are asked to inhabit. A family watching their child succumb to a prolonged illness will have death show up long before the coroner takes note of its arrival. If the question is, *when, to me*, does *my* death show up, a bewildering number of answers seem possible. Kierkegaard has it show up as he joins a dialectical dance. Socrates has it show up as he does philosophy. For many of us, the aura of death may show up in the 'gritty' brush with death, in accounts of war, in the death of a relative, in reading a particular novel, in a medical lab report, or beyond grittiness altogether, in the smile of a child. Its appearance can instill the sense of earnestness and urgency that Kierkegaard sees as the desirable moral-religious transfiguring of our lives. The intimate agency of death is loosed, aimed at changing our lives.

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<sup>23</sup> In *Being and Time*, Heidegger lists a number of modes of awareness of death: see xxx

<sup>24</sup> We might ask, in this age of heart transplants, whether the dead live on in the living -- since a heart of the dead may.

<sup>25</sup> Asking when death arrives (or is left behind), is a little like asking when love arrives or is left behind, or when birth arrives or is left behind. Birth might begin with the exchange of a glance between lovers, with a mid-wife's cry of delight, with the utterance of a first word, or with setting out from home. Death might begin with birth, or with the first failed love, or with a final gasp of the lungs, or with the departure from memory of all those who might have remembered one -- as one was when alive. How one thinks of death or birth -- or love, for that matter -- may depend on being able to occupy more than one perspective on the phenomena, and being open to their multiple aspects.

## VI.

Kierkegaard inhabited various generative phases of time during his forty odd years in Copenhagen, phases that were overlapping, stacked, and endlessly extending. Exploring the inter-animation among these phases of time models ways death can animate – or as Kierkegaard says, *accelerate* – life. Stanley Cavell speaks of writing while living a posthumous life,<sup>26</sup> and Kierkegaard suggests as a subtitle, “A Posthumous Work of a Solitary Human Being” (WA, 51). And if *he* thought his activity of writing cast him beyond the time of his living, we, a century and a half later, also find his writing cast him beyond (one construal of) the time of his living to a posthumous life. Clerks and tombstones tell only a bit of the story. His presence hovers over numerous conversations and library carrels day in, day out, any recent decade. So the idea of posthumous agency can be placed *before* Kierkegaard’s coroner-death (as he faces backward on his life) or *after* it (running forward) in cultural time as he effects us.

Within the decades before his coroner’s death, we can track agency among the phases of Kierkegaard’s life. The time of his childhood has a “post-childhood” resonance that mimics the way his pre-burial days have a posthumous resonance. His childhood is marked, among other things, by his exposure to other children – to those who laughed, for instance, at the uneven length of his trousers, an exposure that caused interior hurt. That early hurt might reappear later in his life, translated into a new register, as Kierkegaard turned the tables through the verve and bite of his writing: he would expose the uneven spiritual trousers of others. His early hurt was thus transfigured.

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<sup>26</sup> Cavell, “Excerpts from Memory,” *Critical Inquiry*, 2003, p. xx.

Of course one might think that maturity lies in Kierkegaard (or anyone else) being able to leave the childhood hurt and uneven trousers behind, not giving it agency over mid-life. Similarly, one might think that maturity lies in leaving death to the dead, not giving it agency over one's life. If nothing else, so far as childhood goes, one becomes biologically and culturally more and more an adult. We *want* to stop childhood hurts from leaking forward -- however much the child and its wounds ride on well past childhood, undeterred. Similarly, but from the other direction, we *want* to stop thoughts of post-burial time leaking backward, want not to obsess, for instance, on who will say what in those years we can never know. There can surely be *excessive* concern with the power of childhood hurt or future annihilation or cultural life after that to invade one's present life -- leading, perhaps, to morbid self-preoccupation, self-pity, or a sense of victimization. Yes, but there can surely be *deficient* attention to one's early afflictions or inescapable mortality -- leading, perhaps, to a denial of one's fragility, or to self-aggrandizement, or overweening pride.

Thinking of the overlap and agency that permeates different phases of life -- childhood hurt reaching forward to transfigure mid-life, for instance -- we might ponder a second famous incident where a turmoil of Kierkegaard's early adulthood works forward, somewhat underground, to shape his later life. Breaking his engagement exposed Kierkegaard dramatically to ridicule and opprobrium. It began as a more or less dateable occurrence and continued through a powerful afterlife. It's not implausible to find it translated into new keys through his writing. The agency of his writing might meet the agency of waves of opprobrium in ways not unlike the agency of his writing meeting the agency of his death. Then we have life dancing dialectically with death, the scandal of the breakup dancing dialectically with the scandal that was his writing. And the plot might thicken.

Perhaps his writing transfigures the breakup, making it sufferable. Perhaps it turns the tables, exposing *others* to the sort of ridicule to which he had been exposed.<sup>27</sup> Say he exposes the grotesque unevenness and indifference of bourgeois life in Copenhagen, casting opprobrium broadly. A side effect might be that his failing to achieve marriage together with a writerly vocation might not be a lamentable and ridiculous failure but in some way indicative of turmoil all (awakened) souls are heir to. *Fear and Trembling* might show that those who fail as knights of faith and knights of resignation (his contemporaries, that is) are consigned to the ridiculous status of “frogs in life’s swamp.”<sup>28</sup>

## VII.

One can read biographies giving more or less importance in Kierkegaard’s life and writing to childhood hurt or a broken engagement. However, at present I have no substantive biographical thesis to promote about what drives Kierkegaard’s writing. I’m not trying to *explain* his writing or his life, but to explore a hypothetical (but not implausible) interplay between phases of his life – to model how interplay might occur in any life at all. A model can clarify how hurt, turmoil, and death might push backwards and forwards in a life. It exhibits their agency in amorphous time and exemplifies the mysterious agency of death. Just as it may become blurred whether Kierkegaard is in church or elsewhere while in church, so it may become blurred whether in his writing Kierkegaard occupies the time of his earlier hurt or turmoil, or has left that time behind. If Kierkegaard can be alive in two *spaces* at once, he can be alive in two *times* at once.

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<sup>27</sup> Would those who whispered, smiled, or smirked at his broken engagement also nod knowingly at the scandal of his burial, where crowds of his supporters resisted the effort of the church to claim him as their own? – Ref SAK and/or Hannay?

<sup>28</sup> F&T, XX

If human time is amorphous, there is no ready answer to how the agency of hurt begins or ends, or how far it invades the future. There is no ready answer to how the agency of future emptiness invades the present or induces seriousness or earnestness that “accelerates life.” Kierkegaard says that a passion is like a river whose source and endpoint we will never know.<sup>29</sup> Now if we are cartographers in a blimp, we can probably chart the source of a river and its final merging with the sea. But if we are swimming in its midst and middle, both source and endpoint will be hidden.

Does the imprint of uneven commitments to Regine wash away once Kierkegaard decides to shatter the engagement and get on with his life? From a blimp, perhaps we could pinpoint the source of a hurt and its final merging with wider currents down the river of time. But hurt in the soul no doubt lies out of a cartographer’s view, its tendrils receding backward and reaching forward indefinitely, despite the fact that some vivid moments of hurt may erupt in the tick of a moment. Death, too, might leave an imprint of indeterminate duration from a place like a shadow that is only strangely apprehensible.<sup>30</sup>

In mid-life, I can occupy the position of an earlier phase of life, putting myself, say, in the shoes of a child humiliated by the length of his pants, or in the shoes of an early adult

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<sup>29</sup> CUP, 1: 237, trans. altered. The passage is discussed in Pattison, “*Poor Paris!*” p.97. Perhaps there is a calendar date for the peak of sidewalk teasing, or for the writing of a note that shattered an engagement. But the specificity of time and place of these occurrences diminishes as we track their *meaning*. They seem to contain within themselves an indefinitely expansive presence that progressively resists accurate mapping in terms of time and place. The effects or meanings of his exposure to jeering classmates or twittering street gossips ripple backward and forward indefinitely in the time and space of his life. In addition to a dateable occasion of exposure there is a penumbra before and after that can be of immense importance but resistant to dating. Can we tell, with any precision, the length and intensity of the aftereffects of these events? Yet it doesn’t seem excessive to imagine that the impacts spread out indefinitely

<sup>30</sup> The death of Kierkegaard’s best friend, or of his father or his mother, enters the city clerk’s records as a well-defined occurrence. But the meaning of those deaths ripples forward, back, and sideways in his life, as aftershocks that defy precise dating and tracking. This effect of death, this agency of death, is other than the effect of anticipating my own death, looking at my own life from beyond the grave, in earnestness, as it were.

scorned for his vacillation or for his sensitivity to paths not taken. And in mid-life I can occupy the position of a later phase, or end-time, of life, putting myself, say, in the shoes of one dead looking back on life, assessing its vitality or debility. In fact, if death has agency that “gives force [to living] like nothing else does,” that occurs only insofar as temporality is amorphous. It occurs only insofar as I can project myself into shoes that give me a prospect on my life from beyond it, so that I see that I-am-alive-and-will-die, so that I enjoy a prospect on my life from a time beyond life’s end-time. From that spot, I participate in death’s retrospective transfigurations of earlier life, in the change the adoption of that position makes possible and enacts. I participate as a dancer embraces and moves with her partner’s embrace and moves. My dance with the thought of death is my dance in the present and with a time not of this present. I partake of an amorphous existence.

We can dance with death because we can step in another’s shoes. That other in whose shoes I step is myself – myself looking back as from beyond the grave. We know implicitly that that self-from-beyond-the-grave is us -- every bit as much us as that self-this-side-of-the-grave, the self caught up in eating, drinking, paying taxes, sleeping, being with family, and being a solitary walker through life, as companionable with death as with life.

### VIII.

Death is an enigma, Kierkegaard tells us, an alluring yet elusive thought that never holds still long enough for our thinking to be ‘done’ with it. He writes, in boldface, of “**death’s decision**”. Out of nowhere, we have the sentence, “This discourse will therefore be about [new line, the next words centered] **death’s decision**” (TDIO, 76). It interrupts like a disruption of settled routines, a disruption of the essay’s unfolding. A reification or

personification of death has intervened to announce, *this is my decision!* With this rude appearance, we startle awake, awaiting what verdict or decision will be delivered so portentously. But consistent with the enigma of death, we don't learn *what* the decision is, only that it is entered, the gavel is struck, things are irretrievably changed. Like Kafka's Joseph K., we know we are charged, sentenced, even as we are ignorant of the charges.

This intrusion alters my attunement to life. Death's decision concerns *me*, the reader. I am charged to take my life seriously, though what that means in detail is unknown. The next step is mine alone. I might slip into denial, declare to myself that the boldface announcement is in error. Reading this discourse with an editor's eye, I take out my pen to write, "Explain!" -- or perhaps, "Delete!" -- for the boldface words hang more or less lifeless, adding nothing discursive, serving only to distract. But if I read open to existential transformation, the bold words are a clap of thunder. I know I have changed before I can ask what has happened, or ask what has been decided, or ask exactly *how* I am to change my very next action, in light of the decision. Death picks up the soul from its sleep before its specific meaning is evident. That meaning unfolds as I dance.

Now if we keep Socrates in mind, we remember that those he affected were taken by him *before* they could ask what had happened, what verdict on their lives he was effecting, how they were meant to change in its light. Having been stung, if they asked what he taught, he might retreat with a "nothing." He would claim he knew nothing, even as those present knew they had, as it were, *already* been taught. They had been stung by the *pure need* to change: "*Change your life!*"

Does the rude intrusion of death, the sharp sudden awareness that we live with halts 'round our necks, suffice as death's teaching? It does only if it awakens me to the earnestness

of my life. What follows is business between me and my soul. However disturbing the reverberations within me, broadcasting them would mean little to most neighbors. Their import is both decisive and enigmatic. Another could sense I had taken up a new seriousness in the conduct of my life, but be able to pin down little more. As for myself, I would know only that something like conscience had spoken, even as I stammered to convey what more, specifically, had shifted or been decided.

Just so, the friends of Socrates could know they were stung yet be utterly baffled, as Alcibiades was, to say how it happened. Alcibiades knows he now feels ashamed of his life, as if he must change it. He wants to take up a dance with this man who has nipped at his heart. But Socrates dances only with the divine, a solo dance. The dance with conscience is solo. If Alcibiades is earnest (he's only partially so), that seriousness can't be cashed out in the success of a particular venture, say the fulfillment of his desire to have Socrates enter his *body*, to complement Socrates entering his soul.

Death's work is not necessarily evident to those who observe us, and may even be opaque to ourselves. Can I know better than others when I am *really* serious about my tasks? As Kierkegaard puts it: "Death's decisiveness is like an empty space and like a silence in which nothing is heard" (TDIO, 85).

## IX.

We might think of life as a moment of daylight before the darkness of night sets in. Kierkegaard suggests this image in his discourse "At a Graveside". And there is night before I am born, as well. Of course, the moment of life might be expanded beyond the span of a day, or contracted. Beckett has "woman give birth squatting astride the grave and we are

given a tick of time for our fall into nothingness”.<sup>31</sup> Bede gives us a short time, as well, the span of the swift flight of a single sparrow through a banquet hall, in one window and out the other.<sup>32</sup> Kierkegaard’s life might be a luminous daytime during which he dons his trousers and wrestles his uneven commitments. It is also, of course, a time when he dons a way of being in Copenhagen, a person with these opportunities, these talents, these anxieties, these parents, this insufferable older brother. (Or perhaps his life is less donning a role or accepting a talent than having a role or talent thrust on him.) And we might think of Kierkegaard’s life from a more public vantage, from which that image of darkness before and after loses its grip.

Kierkegaard’s death as he sees it (at times) is an impending darkness beyond definition or description. But for others, Kierkegaard’s death is in part the exposure of his body to praise and opprobrium at the time of his public burial – the near riot at the graveside, the loud protest that a church burial would have been anathema to him, and was covering over his attacks on the church. It’s natural to describe his funeral (and the days after it) as in many ways continuous with his writing, his last days in hospital, and his earlier rebukes of the church. The scandal of his life continues through and beyond his burial. This starts his posthumous life *for us*. And *for him*, as he lives, his death vaults back from the future into the flow of his life as he exposes in writing a way of being with death. Thus he writes, as

Johannes Climacus of the *Postscript*, of a visit to ‘the garden of death’ where he overhears an

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<sup>31</sup> Richard G. Geldard puts Beckett thus in *Parmenides and the Way of Truth*, Rhinebeck New York: Monkfish Book Publishing, 2007, 80.

<sup>32</sup> Patrick Stokes provides the marvelous passage from Bede: “The present life of man, O king, seems to me, in comparison of that time which is unknown to us, like to the swift flight of a sparrow through the room wherein you sit at supper in winter, with your commanders and ministers, and a good fire in the midst, whilst the storms of rain and snow prevail abroad; the sparrow, I say, flying in at one door, and immediately out at another, whilst he is within, is safe from the wintry storm; but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, into the dark winter from which he had emerged. So this life of man appears for a short space, but of what went before, or what is to follow, we are utterly ignorant.” *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, eds. J. A. Giles, G. Gray, London: Tiger of the Stripe, 2007, Bk II, Ch. 13, p. 114

old man speak to his grandson about death.<sup>33</sup> He hints elsewhere in *Postscript* that Socratic dialectic is a kind of dance with death, an image of philosophy requiring a kind of death that flows backward to enter the life of one dancing alone with last things. And for Kierkegaard, there are times before his burial when, laying out his dialectical adventures, he frames an adventure with his own death.<sup>34</sup> All this wreaks havoc with a simple image of darkness before-and-after the light that is life.<sup>35</sup>

## X.

God brings about transfiguration, we're told. And there's a hint that dance, when it's a dance with death, brings about transfiguration. Both might be true. God might oversee the dance, like a concerned parent, ready with advice and keeping hopes high, and ready with rescue. Humans perform and interpret the parts that befall them (or that they pick up) before and through transfiguration. To the participant, these parts might seem to descend from above, or ascend from the grave. And as outsiders, we cannot know, but can have faith alone, that the taxpaying author is transfigured into the poeticized author who speaks from the text. We

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<sup>33</sup> I discuss Climacus' eavesdropping on the matter of death in "From the Garden of the Dead: Johannes Climacus on the Varieties of Religious Inwardness", in Rick Furtak (ed.), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript: A Critical Guide*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

<sup>34</sup> "At a Graveside" can be read as a refutation of the Epicurean claim that my death and I cannot co-exist. See Patrick Stokes, "The Power of Death: Retroactivity, Narrative, and Interest" in Perkins, Robert L. (Ed.) *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Prefaces/Writing Sampler and Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006) pp.387-417

<sup>35</sup> Assorted remarks to ponder further, taken from Kierkegaard's discourse (emphasis added): *if it is certain that death itself never becomes involved in giving any explanations – 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.*** Death is a sleep (TDIO, 81) But sleeping in death is not sleeping in life. The earnest **thought** of death has helped to make a final hour infinitely meaningful (TDIO, 84). The earnest person has made friends with the contenders [life and death] and in the earnest thought of death he has had the most faithful ally. Even though the equality of all the dead is that now all is over, there is still one difference . . . – **the difference of what that life was** that now in death is over. "**Then all is over!**"[Yet] supported by the earnest thought of death, the earnest person says "**All is not over.**"

cannot know but can have faith alone that as authors of our lives, we will pass transfigured into life, at least cultural life, after (and by) death. Perhaps God stands behind transfigurations of persons, raising spirit and life from death and decay. But then Kierkegaard the author of books and Kierkegaard the author of a life dances with death and also with the divine, or before it. How might this be a dance with the divine?

Joseph Westphall reminds us, in *The Kierkegaardian Author*, that “The author comes to be understood by his or her readers as both author and work, *simultaneously* but *separately* the creator of the work and a created element within it”. Thus the transfigured author “gives birth to him- or herself by writing the work in which he or she is written”.<sup>36</sup> What if, in that first sentence, we substituted “God” for “the author”? We’d have “God comes to be understood by his or her readers as both author and work, *simultaneously* but *separately* the creator of the work and a created element within it.” God, after all, is an actor within *Genesis*. But I go down this dangerous theological path no further.

Writers give their work a kind of imperishable existence, a kind of immortality, as Westfall reads Kierkegaard.<sup>37</sup> Death and resurrection are in play as tax-liable Kierkegaard dies, and implied-author Kierkegaard rises up from the grave. Accordingly, the true poet is engaged in “posthumous production”, thus, “A Posthumous Work of a Solitary Human Being”.<sup>38</sup> The work manifests as the papers of one who has died and is now post-death. The

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<sup>36</sup> Westfall, Joseph *The Kierkegaardian Author: Authorship and Performance in Kierkegaard's Literary and Dramatic Criticism* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007) p. 143. Kierkegaard was polemical and cagey enough to revel in the changing shadows of a self and in the difficulties others would have in finding him. And he was moral and religious enough to exploit another possibility that his maze of writings afforded. In that maze, Kierkegaard continually intimates that only where radical openness to change is present – that is, only where a solid self *can't* be pinned down -- can there be hope of transfiguration.

<sup>37</sup> Westfall *The Kierkegaardian Author* p. 51

<sup>38</sup> Xxxx. (NEED REF.) Interestingly Cavell calls his “Excerpts from Memory” (fragments of what develops as his intellectual autobiography) his *posthumous* writing.

posthumous work is passed back into the world to belong to an implied living author, a solitary being who has died but anomalously now lives. This makes the deflationary biography that addresses the mortal taxpayer and flawed suitor rather irrelevant to students of Kierkegaard-as-writer. “The freedom of literature – its true immortality – is its absolute distance from the factual”.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps this is the thought that death and life, hurt and love, are amorphous and anomalous, sharply etched in coroner’s and in familial, and in cultural space and time, and yet at any moment not in one or another of these -- diaphanous, elusive, indefinite or infinite.

## XI.

The earnestness that can retrospectively befall me as I dance with the thought of death is like the earnestness that can befall me when I suddenly see things from the shoes of another and realize that I must change my ways. I have just been slow in taking up the impact of that pain on her life; I have lacked, I admit, a measure of earnestness (but how much is enough?). So I reconfigure my sense of how it is with her. Perhaps the thought of her pain, and my dancing awkwardly with that thought, gives me a more earnest sense of her realities, and of my lack of earnestness in facing them. The thought of her pain might parallel the thought of her death, and my lack of earnestness about either might parallel my insensitivity to pain or death generally, including my own. Dancing with the thought of death might transfigure my thought of life, might accelerate my life, give it a measure of earnestness.

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<sup>39</sup> Westfall *The Kierkegaardian Author* p. 135. A related consequence of a text’s immortality is that SK can’t fix the meaning of a part or the whole of the authorship with any authority exceeding the authority of any other reader. He can’t give an “incontrovertible last word on Kierkegaardian authorship” (p. 77).

Kierkegaard says that death is enigmatic. An enigma is something less than utterly opaque. It's something that I see this moment and don't see the next, or see first as profound, and then as superficial, or see first as liberating and then as constraining. Death becomes enigmatic because, like time and love and hurt, it is sometimes here-and-now and then becomes yesterday-or-tomorrow and sometimes seems both, both here and not here, as when I am in my shoes and yours, or see death from the midst of life and from the midst of death, all at once.

Death is enigmatic partly because we have no stable context from which to think of it. It shifts aspect from personal time to coroner's time to family time to cultural time (for example, and just for starters). It is enigmatic, too, because it's not particularly pleasant to think of or face, and so we have good reason to keep it out of focus. That is part of what is arresting about Kierkegaard's talk of a somewhat amorous dance. Wouldn't it be better to battle or flee or bury it – rather than *dance*? Perhaps we should just deflect the thought of death, sticking to the trivializing mood of Tolstoy's syllogism: All persons die; I am a person; I will die.<sup>40</sup> Or a blood chilling variant: Now he is dead nothing matters (to him); when I am dead nothing matters (to me); death doesn't matter; it doesn't matter if I die; it doesn't matter if you die. No doubt the logic of the latter is flawed, but even so, the problem might lie deeper than logic. If Kierkegaard is right, we must hear not a syllogism or argument, but a decision, a verdict: *you will die, act now (be more earnest): Let the thought of death deliver you from distraction that your life may be changed!*

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<sup>40</sup> Tolstoy isn't endorsing such a syllogism himself; he has Ivan Ilyich quote it at second hand: "The example of a syllogism which he had learned in Kiezewetter's *Logic*: "Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal," had seemed to him all his life to be true as applied to Caius but certainly not as regards himself." Tolstoy, Leo *The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories* trans. Rosemary Edmondson (London: Penguin, 1960) p.137

I can be the person looking at myself, and so can separate myself from myself, occupying two postures at once toward a soul that slips in and out of view yet is one -- and doubled -- and my own; things can matter or not, I can know and not know that my life matters, or that your life matters, or that the fall of a sparrow matters; my doubleness is requisite both to finding that my life matters and to finding that your life matters; and taking my life with earnestness (or not) is inextricably, mysteriously, tied to taking your life with earnestness (or not).

The strangeness of dancing with the thought of death is like the human mystery of seeing that life matters, mine and yours. Death brings me there (and love will, as well). A dance with these thoughts is neither abrasive nor competitive but pleasantly if anxiously inviting. A dance with death is the consummate embrace of the consummate other, a life with the other, and with the other who *even to myself*, I am.

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*Postscript:* I imagine Kierkegaard had death at his elbow as he wrote posthumously, but also had Hamlet, Faust, and Quixote nearby, figures who in one way or the other spoke and delivered from the grave, or beyond it, and that these death-dancing figures were accompanied, of course, by Socrates. These were his essential others, prompting him from the graveyard of their lives. Is philosophy *writing out our lives from beyond the grave – with the help of our essential (and ghostly) others?* Socrates, Faust, Hamlet or Quixote rise from their graves to give words for exploring tiny pockets and then vast panoramas of life. They seem to speak from the dead -- or is it that we *raise* them from the dead – or both? Perhaps we pass over to share their ghostly realms to understand *them* better -- and then *return*. Kierkegaard loved Hamlet, who communed with ghosts, was thoroughly literary, full of self-

doubt, and as melancholy and anxious as Faust. And Kierkegaard loved the madness of that knight Quixote, jousting to bring old faith to a forgetful and cruel world. And he loved Socrates, on whom he conferred a ghostly post-pagan (perhaps mad) Christian status. As he put it, “I can't believe that Socrates has not become a Christian” (POV, 54; translation modified). His task, he said, had always been to follow Socrates, and I'd only add that his task was *also* to follow Hamlet, Faust, and Quixote, all of whom danced with the shadow of death. We should be able to dance with *his* ghosts, and so dance with death, writing somewhat in its embrace, as did he.