

FROM THE GARDEN OF THE DEAD: Climacus on Interpersonal Inwardness

Epigraph

- I. The Setting that Steals his Heart
- II. Grave Critiques of Objectivity
- III. The Romance and Comedy of Revelation and Resolve
- IV. Subjectivity is Interpersonal and Nature-immersed
- V. Foretastes: Farewell Enigmas and Communing with the Dead
- VI. Heartfeltness -- Bound Inward and Outward
- VII. Why Advocate Hidden Inwardness?

Coda: Preserving the Living and the Dead

Here in the span of a hand we have the worlds of the Postscript engraved. Or, as in Hamlet's 'Mousetrap', have a play within a play to catch our conscience by surprise, and return us to the sufferings and smiles that are the wonder of life.

I. THE SETTING THAT STEALS HIS HEART

Climacus reports a scene overheard, seen in a fugitive glance through leaves as he sat on a bench at twilight in 'the garden of the dead', a cemetery, most likely Copenhagen's *Assistens Kirkegård*. The scene is the grief of a grandfather mourning at the grave of his son, and speaking tearfully of the meaning of that death to a ten-year-old boy, his grandson, now fatherless. The 'garden of the dead', as it is called, is not at the city's center, but at some remove, not out in the wooded parklands, but nevertheless sufficiently alive with nature's leafy shadows and open skies that Climacus can exalt in a kind of minor ecstasy over the coming of night -- as if night were an invitation for a "nocturnal tryst", a beautiful prelude to the more tearful tableau ahead, where a

grandfather's grief will spill over as an anguished admonition to his barely understanding grandson. But what can the night tell us of mood, yearning, and heartache? Night beckons with promise of a

tryst . . . with the infinite, persuaded by the night's breeze as in a monotone it repeats itself, breathing through forest and meadow, and sighing as though in search of something, urged by the distant echo in oneself of the stillness as if intimating something, urged by the sublime calm of the heavens, as if this something had been found, persuaded by the palpable silence of the dew as if this were the explanation and infinitude's refreshment, like the fecundity of a quiet night, only half understood like the night's semi-diaphanous mist. (197)

The coming of night is only half-understood, like an uncanny mist, hard to frame, and so like a Kantian sublime. Yet the preferred example of the sublime for Kant would be a towering, awesome occasion: the violence of ocean storms, the wonder of starry heavens. In our *Postscript* passage, the sublime is a downscaled scene of allure and fear. Death haunts, but the surround is the half-understood gentle breathing, sighing, of a breeze, the "semi-diaphanous mist" of the night, the "palpable silence of the dew."

This gentle sublime leaves us in a tremulous, restless repose. An invitation to a nocturnal tryst foretells both refreshment and anxiety, like Kant's mix of pleasure and fear. We yearn for the infinite repose of a beckoning night, as a Christian might yearn for the infinite repose of a savior, seen through a glass darkly. But Climacus is a romantic, not a Christian. He yearns for the comfort not of a savior but sensed in the "silence of the dew", in a "semi-diaphanous mist." His evocations of night breeze and dew bear comparison with the elegies to the lilies of the fields and the birds of the air (in Kierkegaard's discourses of 1849). As George Pattison notes, here

nature “signals a kind of transcendence” that evokes “the anxiety of self-relation”.¹ The repose of a lily or bird signals the contentment humans yearn for but lack. The anxious dark of the night and dark of the soul implicate each other in mutual resonance.

II. *GRAVE CRITIQUES OF OBJECTIVITY*

Our *mise en scène* is a condensed and powerful meditation on death and grief, held by sky above and fresh grave below. Stepping beyond this garden of death, we might consider what’s meant by “truth is subjectivity”, or “true inwardness” but such disquisitions would remove us from the settings from which things and persons speak, from a man broken in grief, a frightened grandson, a fresh grave, an anxious night, a screen of leafy boughs behind which Climacus hides and listens. This tryst with the infinite realizes an “objective uncertainty” held in “the most passionate inwardness,” a restless inwardness:

the night’s breeze . . . repeats itself, breathing through forest and meadow, and sighing as though in search of something, urged by the distant echo in oneself of the stillness as if intimating something. (197)

The sighing of night reflects a sighing soul, and a sighing soul reflects the night breeze, both yearning for a rest signaled by silent dew. It’s not as though the physiology of anxiety *caused* the skies to spin, or the spin of the sky *caused* the brain to spin. It’s a matter of poetic fit, as lightening portends shock to the heart, and shock to the heart portends lightening.

Death disrupts the living, puts the dead under judgment, and warns the living to take heed. Death speaks indirectly through a night breeze and also through words overheard. The grief-wrought old man does not intend his words for the eavesdropping Climacus. As they float by more or less anonymously, Climacus is *taken* by them, and takes them up as his *own*. Climacus is a sometime mimic of the subjective thinker, so perhaps he *appropriates* the grief that floats his

way. In its primary sense, however, to appropriate is to illicitly seize -- as in an illicit appropriation, theft, of land or funds, and Climacus is no thief. What is stolen away is his composure, in the way a love or beauty or truth might steal up and overcome him. Grief and its lessons of death and life, *steal into* his heart. He makes his *own* what has in the first instance captured *him*. The subjective thinker *appropriates* what first *appropriates him*.

What are the lessons of life and death revealed in this setting? The old man fears for the soul of the departed, for his son was caught up in the cultural illusion that philosophical or historical speculation or debate *about* faith could be a substitute for *being* of faith. Now, through tears, he pleads with his grandson. Beware! Erudite scholarly engagement with a religion is not a work of faith but of an alienating and distracting objectivity. A perfect analysis of faith does not give me faith: I might be no more than an atheist, humorist, or scholar.

III. *THE ROMANCE AND COMEDY OF REVELATION AND RESOLVE*

Grief wafts contagiously through the night. Climacus grieves not for the corpse in the grave but for the old man who is denied a restful old age, trembling that his son faces perdition, having taken up with abstract philosophy as a substitute for faith. If the old man correctly identifies the cause of his son's downfall, and furthermore, if Climacus is at a loss, utterly *bored* with his life, then this setting suggests a resolve. Climacus can launch a crusade against abstract philosophy. But does Climacus realize that a crusade against objective philosophy, however worthy, will not move him an inch toward Christian faith. He will annoy cognoscenti trumpeting philosophy as a high form of Christianity, or replacement of it. But to crusade against the arrogance of theory is not to *become* a Christian. As a self-described humorist, Climacus perhaps knows no that a demolition of theory will not fill the void hollowed out by his own absence of faith. A humorist

will understand what's wrong with theory and what's right with the available Christian cure. But Climacus won't take the cure. He is fundamentally uninterested in becoming Christian himself.

This scene of inadvertent spying opens disarmingly: "What happened is quite simple. It was four years ago . . ." (197), we're told. The writer simply sat on a bench, becoming inadvertently privy to a conversation. Yet that moment triggers vocation. Climacus hears a "*decisive summons [for him] to come on a definite track.*" (202). And why should *this* be the moment of revelation or conversion? He works through the moment out loud. "You are after all, tired of life's diversions, you are tired of girls that you love only in passing, you must have something that fully occupies your time. Here it is." (Ibid.) Can this be comedy central! He mocks the gravity of losing one's soul (hence needing a summons) by pairing it with the ridiculousness of losing interest in flirting. This puts the need for religious or moral salvation on a par with the need to be tickled by pretty girls.

Graveside weeping awakens Climacus to a need for direction, but his understanding is comically inept. He needs a replacement for flirting, but wonders exactly *what* this replacement looks like. He is at the threshold of a new life, but how will he find out what his vocation will be? His suggestion of a method of discovery once more is utter comedy. He must face "something like an intricate criminal case in which the very complex circumstances [make] pursuit of the truth difficult". (202) He says he faces a *detective's* puzzle, as if he faced a "*Who done it?*" of a crime mystery. But "*How should I live?*" is an *existential* question. *Who did it* is not *what do I do*. One answer is massively *inessential* to my life; the other is massively essential. Amidst the flailings of comedy, however, we find traces of truth.

Death does alert one to the need for "a definite track" even though Climacus stumbles absurdly in trying to absorb what that need amounts to. The anxious "whence-and-whither" of his life is not just a police matter, a challenge for gumshoes with flashlights. In a moment of lucidity,

he bravely reflects, *you are tired of girls that you love only in passing*. He grabs his detective's flashlight to spot what comes next in his life. He has managed to shift from idle flirtation to sense the need for a serious vocation, the other side of his hearing a summons to do *something*. And he musters a *resolve* to take up "a definite track": he'll become a critic of abstract philosophizing, of misplaced objectivity. *Postscript*, in fact, becomes the fulfillment of his graveside summons. (As an aside before we move on to his critique of theory, we should remember that a defense of existential subjectivity is does not make one a subjective thinker any more than knowing, as the humorist does, what is essential to becoming a Christian makes one closer to actually *becoming* a Christian.) Now what *is* the subjectivity that Climacus defends?

IV. *SUBJECTIVITY IS INTERPERSONAL AND NATURE-IMMERSED*

Climacus' graveside testimony leaves a rich sketch of existential subjectivity -- *not* just a pinpoint of agency or choice, or a moment of appropriation or responsibility, or a locus of 'hidden inwardness'. Subjectivity is a boundless sphere in which *nature, death, and other persons interweave in mutual resonance*. This resonance awakens Climacus to his own subjectivity -- his relations, for instance, to nature, death, and other persons. Far from an isolated impenetrable inner space, subjectivity is *a natural, embodied, interpersonal space*.

The author of this 600 page "postscript" is mainly an objective thinker, defending the truth that truth is subjectivity.² But ever and again, as in this graveside scene, he slips into a confessional mood that places him well within *subjective* space, describing it from within, enacting its moves. He's subject to intimations of night mist, to sudden earnestness about his life's orientation, to being taken by effusions from a gravesite that *address* him. Subjectivity includes capacity to assume the space of other subjectivities. Climacus is the old man who sees

the ruse of philosophy -- is the child subjected to an insistence that he disavow his father's life -- is the fearsome corpse, reminder of a life squandered. (200)

Chalked with age, the old man anchors a social and subjective space that links three generations and an invisible listener, a space activated by a corpse who prompts inwardness -- all this embraced by a surrounding night. This listening and speaking, this passive and active ensemble, is not just a lonely and solitary affair, but ultimately social. Climacus calls it a “*natural form of interpersonal association*”³ (203), thus a *social* space, free from the seductions of an indifferent, third-personal objectivity. Climacus waits “womanlike” for the infinite to half-appear, in “the night’s semi-diaphanous mist.”

V. *FORETASTES: FAREWELL ENIGMAS AND COMMUNING WITH THE DEAD*

Climacus is welcomed to a nocturnal tryst, yet no such tryst is offered the old man. He lives under an anxious sky, knowing he must die, that his son has just died, that his grandson must live under clouds of his father’s death and then under his grandfather’s impending demise. Soon enough he must live alone, only a child. The old man abides the enigmas of farewell.

Evening’s leave-taking of the day, and of the one who has lived that day, is a speech in a riddle. Its reminder [of danger] is like the solicitous mother’s admonition to the child to be home in good time.

Farewells, leave-takings, are exchanged in the confidence that the sun will rise, that the world will return, that our friends will *not* enter the grave in the night – even as we know darkly that a *final* farewell awaits. Then there will be *no* tomorrow, we *won’t* awake, the beloved will *not* return. A therapist must have a lively sense of death.⁴ Termination, and respect for it, hangs over all developing therapeutic attachments. Climacus offers the disquieting riddle of a mother fearfully holding her child yet bravely letting go in bidding farewell. To “hold” the anxieties of a

child (or an analysand) is always also to anticipate the day when the child (or analysand) will depart to live in freedom (or depart in death, abandoned all around). Good mothering, good mentoring, good therapy embodies and emboldens a “being toward death,” an eye on termination that colors all action and thought even as hope is also conveyed. Here is a primal riddle of foreboding farewells and irrepressible hopes, of being toward death and toward birth. A “tryst with the infinite” brings love and death in tow amidst abiding uncertainties.

Climacus has no particular grave to visit. Yet perhaps he is already somewhat dead, and so *does* have a grave close by. Can he commune with himself as one communes with the dead?

There is always in this garden, among the visitors, a beautiful understanding that one does not come out here to see and to be seen, ... Nor does one need company, here where all is eloquence, where the dead greet one with the brief word placed on his grave, not like a clergyman who gives sermons on that word far and wide, but as a silent man does who says no more than this yet says it with a passion as though the dead would burst open the tomb – or is it not strange to have on his grave “we shall meet again’ and to remain down there? (197)

The night speaks without words. Now the dead speak, ready to burst eloquently from the grave, yet “remain down there.” The dead declare, “we shall meet again!” and the living agree. Visitors speak with their *risen* dead. The dead speak with those on the edge or halfway down.

VI. *HEARTFELTNESS -- BOUND INWARD AND OUTWARD*

Inwardness permeates our subjectivity and our communion with the dead. But we should substitute ‘heartfeltness’ for “inwardness” for we are concerned with how we abide with another or others in modes of interpersonal address. Here is Alastair Hannay:

“Inwardness” is by no means a perfect translation of “*Inderlighed*”. As with Hegel’s *Innerlichkeit*, the sense is not that of inward-directedness [but of] an inner warmth, sincerity, seriousness and wholeheartedness in one’s concern for what matters, a “heartfeltness” not applied to something but which comes *from* within.

“Inwardness” brings psychologists to picture introspection or inner-direction, and philosophers to picture Cartesian divides between private consciousness and public world. Yet in his graveyard meditations, Climacus sidesteps all this as he relays how we do and don’t convey who we are to each other, expressing ourselves from the heart (or not), under the burden of death. And Cartesian splits disappear in whispers of night or serenities of dew.

Subjectivity is of the world and others, not a pervasive breach with the world. What might seem like a steel wall is instead porous: it engages the whisper of night and the tears of a neighbor. It flows into the soul of a grandfather, of a dead son, of an abandoned child. Climacus rides the flow of grief to enter them, as they enter him. Climacus advocates “*hidden inwardness*” as a counterweight to “outward bawling” (as he puts it). Hysterical grief or outrage can mask an *absence* of heartfeltness, both outward and inward bound. (220) Courage or truthfulness reach out toward others and things. We are earnest *about* something, heartfelt *with regard to* something. Heartfeltness is a *reciprocal*, interpersonal relation: the heavens offer heartfelt invitation, accepted or refused, passionately or indifferently; a grandfather’s grief is for another, who can return a concern. Heavens invite, an old man pleads. Climacus has ears open, the world pores in; he pores out in response to the world. Such give and take presupposes “interpersonal association”.

VII. *WHY ADVOCATE HIDDEN INWARDNESS?*

There are false passions and true. “Inwardness [will be] untrue to the same degree as the outward expression . . . in words and assurance, is *there, ready to hand* for instant use.” (198) Whatever is there “ready to hand” gives the mimic ample material. True grief will be true to something beyond merely conventional “outward expression.” “Ready to hand” expressions give only “everyday understanding of inwardness.” (Ibid.) Mimics only *mimic* subjectivity.

Commonplace weeping and gesticulations can be true. Recoil in disgust can be perfectly true to one’s affect and circumstance. Yet deep grief will be more than momentary bursts of emotion. Climacus observes that true grief is preserved “not as an instant’s excitement, but as the eternal which has been won through death.” (198). Deep grief will veer from momentary excitement toward the lastingly eternal, eternity gained insofar as one dies to a passion’s outward ephemerality and preserves something deeper. Changeable love or grief is ‘less true’ than its eternal counterpart. We grieve a dead child beyond immediate outbursts. Momentary passion is forgetful; deep inwardness has long memory. “[I]t is not unlovely that a woman gushes over in momentary inwardness nor is it unlovely for her soon to forget it again.” (198) Sexism aside, it is lovely to weep at the moment but lasting grief, eternal grief, is not an outburst from which we move on. Climacus: “Praise be to the one living who relates as a dead man to his inwardness.” The dead do not burst with public gesticulation. *To all the world* it may seem as if I am dead to my grief – it does not pester me to be taken out into the world.

Climacus would endorse the Stoic aim to eradicate false emotion. He differs in thinking that love or grief can be true, and so, worth *preserving*. It’s the false media and marketplace fuss and bother, and shallow attempts to sell one’s emotions, seeking publicity’s profits, that deserve scorn. We might display grief among friends for a month, or on the anniversary of a death, but the time for public displays will soon pass. Then we enter twilight.

Weeping may end, but grief over the loss of a child survives the cessation of weeping. Deep love will sustain grief for one departed. A grief extending timelessly after the death of a child might be so entrenched as to have become a very mark of a mother's identity, neither to be scorned or eradicated, nor to be put on public display. Climacus:

It has always stung my shame to witness another person's expression of feeling when he abandons himself to it as one does only in the belief that one is unobserved; for there is an inwardness of emotion which is befittingly hidden and only revealed to God (198)

If emotion can be "befittingly hidden and only revealed to God", then we can expect great reserve in the expression of lasting love or grief. Heartfeltness may be hidden to the wider world yet expressed elsewhere nonetheless. The old man weeps as he speaks alone to his grandson in a nearly deserted cemetery. He is not mute. Otherwise hidden grief can become unhidden in revelation to God. The limiting case of the truth that inwardness is interpersonal is the occasion when affect arises for God only -- bypassing one's neighbor, priest, spouse, or friend.

CODA: PRESERVING THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

What is living in Kierkegaard? A dialectical lens gives us an inter-weave of nature, subjectivity, and sociality as these mix with vocation, anxiety, and death. Working through these matters will not end tomorrow. A lyrical Kierkegaard sings through image, setting, and passion, providing poetic entry to a luminous dark. Such allures and satisfactions will not end tomorrow.

Midway in his monstrous book of satire and dialectical battle, Climacus sketches a garden of the dead as a lyrical-dialectical miniature of the larger effort. Enter the strolling critic of Copenhagen, the false-heaven of intellectualistic disputation, the true hells and redemptions of stricken fathers, and the worlds of only briefly innocent sons – the worlds of diaphanous mists

and nocturnal trysts, and of the many tensed layers of the heart. In the span of barely half-a-dozen pages, this miniature provides a proof text for all that Climacus tells us elsewhere of truth and subjectivity, double reflection and indirect communication, confession of faith and its revocation, the inward recesses of the heart and their expression, the easy chatter of the classroom and the mystery of inheritance from star-crossed fathers, of farewells from anxious mothers, of receiving word from the risen dead and knowing the costs of a soul's self-betrayal.

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¹ See "Poor Paris!" *Kierkegaard's Critique of the Spectacular City*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999, 128f.

² In the early 1960s Stanley Cavell noted that there was something quixotic in what appears to be Climacus' attempt to *defend* subjectivity. Philosophical defense by definition is an objective project. Yet on second thoughts, that sort of quixotic project is not very foreign to philosophy. Kant, after all, uses reason to limit reason. And, in any case, Climacus is not really *interested* in offering a philosophical defense. He's conducting a kind of thought-experiment, trying out sketches that exemplify features of what must be wrapped up in a way of life, or in a way of living into a life – not trying to *justify* that life. Nevertheless, it can surely *seem* at times that Climacus is doing something academic and philosophical – objective. Later in the 1960s Henry Allison argued that the arguments Climacus delivers are so *patently* flawed that Climacus must be talking tongue-in-cheek. If he *knows* it's bad philosophy, perhaps it's a good mimic or parody. The point might be to parody his rival, Hegel – a kind of hoax at the expense of Hegelians or academics generally. The *Postscript*, like the "Hegelian System" that it mocks, collapses on itself like a house of cards – to our great amusement. We shouldn't laugh at Climacus for the foolishness of the *Postscript*. He knows what he's doing, and does it very well. So well, in fact, that ever-so-many professors think he's producing bona fide philosophy! The joke's on Hegel and anyone else who thinks he's serious about his "mimic-pathetic-dialectic," that most *unscholarly* anti-systematic postscript to some unassuming philosophical crumbs.

³ More accurately, proper inwardness corrects an "unnatural form of interpersonal association."

⁴ Jonathan Lear, *Therapeutic Action: An Earnest Plea for Irony*, New York, Other Press, 2003, 54-7.