Earnestness or Estheticism: Post 9/11 Reflections on Kierkegaard's Two Views of Death

W. Glenn Kirkconnell, *Santa Fe Community College*

Introduction

For Søren Kierkegaard, the depth and maturity of the person is reflected (or perhaps is created) by that person's attitude towards death. Nowhere is this clearer than in the *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, particularly when seen in contrast to its "accompanying" work, *Stages on Life's Way*. In these books, Kierkegaard presents his thoughts on the significance of death as part of his overall strategy to distinguish the truly religious view from the esthetic alternatives so often accepted as true religiousness among his contemporaries. Since there are similar confusions today (and likely always will be) it is valuable to examine Kierkegaard's distinctions and consider their implications. In this paper I intend, first, to examine the "earnest thought of death" as it is presented in these two works, and the dialectic between these two views; then, to further explore the esthetic view, following the hints given in the *Stages*; and finally, to suggest some ways in which the earnest thought of death is of particular relevance today.

Kierkegaard's Two Views of Death

After having written eighteen "upbuilding discourses" distinguished primarily by the scriptural text each treats, Kierkegaard produced *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*. That is, here in his "religious" authorship he introduced a fictional element: "*imagined* occasions." Why is this collection unique in this respect, and why just these "occasions"? One apparent reason is that there is something paradigmatic about these particular occasions in the life of the religious person, such that the fictional element conveys the message as much as the text itself. Furthermore, the fact that this work was released within a day of the massive *Stages on Life's Way* implies that each occasion comments on one of the three stages. The Hongs have offered two contradictory explanations as to how this correspondence runs. In 1988, in the historical introduction to the *Stages*, they cite Emmanuel Hirsch's explanation of the correspondence between the two books. It is clear enough that the discourse set "On the Occasion of a Wedding" comments on Judge William's "reflections on marriage." At first, Hirsch proposed that the other chapters correspond in serial order (one to one, three to three); but Hirsch later came to believe that the chapters correspond in a crisscross

pattern (one to three). In their introduction to the *Stages*, the Hongs endorse Hirsch's later claim of a crisscross correspondence between the chapters of the two books; however, in the 1993 historical introduction to the *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* they assert the serial correspondence that Hirsch rejected. [1]

If it were easy, it wouldn't be Kierkegaard; however, it seems to me that Kierkegaard has used the sort of puzzle so beloved by Hamann; rather than presenting the reader with a direct correspondence, he has opted for the more obscure crisscross structure.[2] Quidam's demonic "shut-upness" in chapter three of the *Stages* contrasts with the first discourse set at a confession; we can see clearly enough that Quidam can only be cured by opening up, as the worshipper confesses his or her guilt to God and before neighbors, and accepts forgiveness. It is less clear, though in many ways more illuminating, to examine how the meditation "At a Graveside" contrasts with the world-view of "In Vino Veritas."

"At a Graveside" begins with a call to, and a meditation on, recollection.[3] We the living may recollect the dead one, that one's life and manner among us. The dead, however, recollect nothing, even if we visit the grave to recollect every day. So it is even more important that, while we still live, we each recollect God while we can. When we recollect one who in life recollected God, we will recollect the serious yet joyful, humble yet confident person the deceased was. "In Vino Veritas" likewise begins with observations on recollection, a similarity that acts to connect the two works.[4] In its emphasis on continuity, Afham's essay resembles *Repetition*, and in its discussion of artistry and forgetting it recalls "Rotation of Crops" from *Either/Or*.[5] But what is possibly more significant is when Afham writes that "The only subject matter for recollection is mood and whatever is classified under mood."[6] This is utterly opposed to Kierkegaard's views from the discourse "At a Graveside," where he distinguishes between mood and earnestness.[7] This is not to say that Kierkegaard rejects Afham's interests and concerns. In fact, he is presenting a different route to Afham's goals. "In Vino Veritas" suggests that one gains continuity by being able to recollect the mood one had in the past attached to a certain event or place, and even by being able to recollect before the event is past, so that the present and future experience of the soon-to-be-past event can be essentially the same. But even so, it is hard to see how anyone could base his or her personal sense of continuity on something as inherently mutable as mood. By contrast, Kierkegaard asserts that it is one's recollection of God that gives one's life continuity.[8] This is what gave his hypothetical dead man his "quiet joy" throughout his life, despite all the changes time brought. While the esthete Afham believes one can escape the disintegration of the self by learning to recollect the "ideality" of (that is, the mood evoked by) the events of one's life, Kierkegaard believes that what rescues the individual and grounds his or her life is the recollection of God. He writes: "The person who is without God in the world soon becomes bored with himself—and expresses this haughtily by being bored with all life, but the person who is in fellowship with God indeed lives with the one whose presence gives

infinite significance to even the most insignificant."[9] It is the lifelong recollection of God, or at least the striving always to better recollect God, that gives one's whole life meaning, a single unifying meaning. So it is as Afham said, that a person who has pursued one idea through his or her whole life has perhaps less to remember but more to recollect; but his mistake was to misunderstand what it was one should recollect. And what will empower a person to recollect God properly is first to recollect the reality of death, to think death through while it is still absent and thought is still possible.

This sort of thinking death is not the same as recollecting in Afham's sense. It is not to have mournful feelings or morbid thoughts, to read Poe or play dirges or even to attend a funeral. While Afham considers mood to be the essential, Kierkegaard vigorously argues against this. It is one thing to be in a somber, sober mood at a funeral; it is quite another to take the thought of death and finitude to heart, and be built up by it. The reader is invited to consider death, to meditate upon it; not just in the general sense that all living things die, but in the quite personal sense that you will die, any time now, and that will be the end of it. It is quite possible to meditate on death, become melancholy over it, sorrow cynically or depressedly over it. It is even possible to reflect on one's own inevitable death with such thoughts that one will "rest from one's labors" or "finally find peace," and thus possibly even anticipate the end of one's life with a certain pleasure. But in all this, one has not seriously thought through that *you* are going to *die*; not just anyone, and not just rest or escape one's burdens, but that *all* one's hopes and projects and desires will be cut off permanently by death. As long as there is any abstraction, impersonality, or unclarity in thinking about death, the awareness of it remains at the level of mood: an esthetic awareness. But when one considers with stark clarity what one's own death means, one can become earnest. One can begin to see the ultimate futility of all one's finite attachments, which will be cut off by death, and also begin to see how urgent it is that one seek the "one thing needful" while there is still time. One must personally appropriate the thought of one's own death; to learn from another is no use, nor to know everything and never let it apply to one's own life. There is no objective or second-hand consideration of one's own death, unless one has retreated into the unclarity of mood and is avoiding the clarity of earnestness. There is relatively little said in the discourse about God and the nature of the God-relationship; by contrast, there is quite a lot said about the many evasions of earnestness one might invent, and how the earnest thought of death can shake one out of any mere mood and impel one to earnest action and decision. This is really a discourse about the break with the esthetic and the move to a higher existence, one that recognizes the final refutation of finitude which death presents. It is also a discourse on decisiveness, which recognizes the fact that death has made temporality precious by limiting the span of time each individual has to decide and act. This is the beginning of the journey to a higher existence, and ultimately towards a mature God-relationship.

The banqueters in "In Vino Veritas" are also drawn together, as Victor Eremita says, by "the earnest thought of death."[10] However, for them it leads in an opposite direction. Where meditation at a graveside led to sobriety, here it is the prelude to drunkenness. In the discourse, the thought of death leads one to contemplate seriously one's relationship to eternity; for the banqueters it leads only to greater immersion in frivolity and estrangement from eternity. And the reason is fairly obvious: the earnest thought of death at the graveside is *your* thought of *your* death; for the banqueters, it is the thought of the death of everything else. The banqueters end by tasting their own infinitude, or as the Seducer says, they feast on the bait of the gods (woman) while avoiding all real relationships to any actual other. Almost at once, the banquet hall itself is destroyed by waiting workmen, while the banqueters themselves flee into the darkness to resume their meaningless lives another day. When the eternal does make its appearance (in the form of the ethical injunction contained in the Judge's essay on marriage), it appears comical, accidental and even criminal, as the essay is stolen by the revelers and read as an amusement. That is, for these esthetes, for whom death is something that happens to others, even the eternal seems to be a joke.

We have two understandings of the "earnest thought of death" offered in the conjoined works *Stages on Life's Way* and *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*. In the esthetic view, one reflects on the passing of all things, but in a rather detached way, as if one could watch even one's own death from a distance and draw out all the melancholy enjoyment it offered. In the religious view, worldly concerns shrink into insignificance as one contemplates one's own mortality, and in this contemplation finds oneself in the presence of God. At the same time, this world takes on greater significance.[11] The esthete, who is without God in the world, becomes bored with life. It seems meaningless and tedious, even interminable. And that is one thing that the earnest thought of death shows life *not* to be. It is terribly terminable, even terminal. No one gets out alive. And when you realize that your life is ticking away, each moment becomes valuable. As Kierkegaard writes:

> Indeed, time also is a good. If a person were able to produce a scarcity in the external world, yes, then he would be busy. The merchant is correct in saying that the commodity certainly has its price, but the price still depends very much on the advantageous circumstances at the time—and when there is scarcity, the merchant profits. A person is perhaps not able to do this in the external world, but in the world of spirit everyone is able to do it. Death itself produces a scarcity of time for the dying. Who has not heard how one day, sometimes one hour, was jacked up in price when the dying one bargained with death! Who has not heard how one day, sometimes one hour, gained infinite worth because death made time dear! Death is able to do this, but with the thought of death the earnest person is able to create a scarcity so that the year and the day receive infinite worth—and when it is a time of scarcity the merchant profits by using time. But if public security is unsettled, the merchant does not

> carelessly pile up his profits but watches over his treasure lest a thief break in and take it away from him; alas, death also is like a thief in the night.[12]

The "earnest" thought of death does not have this effect for the banqueters. And how could it, when they themselves do not take death earnestly? How can they help but see life as interminably boring, when they do not see it as terminal? To the banqueters, death is not the end. Constantin makes this point when he compares death to unhappy love, and the repeated refrain of the women who have sworn they will die of broken hearts—and yet live.[13] Eremita makes the point again when he discusses the significance of woman for man—primarily, he says, the significance of her leaving, even dying, so that his life can have significance.[14] For them, death is something experienced by some person, but has significance for another. A dead body is amusing; a dead wife can awaken genius in her mournful husband; to die of love is something that one promises or threatens to another. Kierkegaard writes that "To think of oneself as dead is earnestness; to be a witness to the death of another is mood,"[15] and it is as something that happens to others that the banqueters discuss death.

It is clear that Kierkegaard's discourse "At a Graveside" offers a fruitful contrast to the esthetic essay "In Vino Veritas." The contrast becomes even more interesting when Kierkegaard's discourse is compared to the much earlier esthetic writings contained in the first volume of *Either/Or*. Kierkegaard has himself invited this comparison, by using Victor Eremita and Johannes the Seducer (both from *Either/Or*) as characters in the *Stages*. In fact, the first two chapters of the *Stages* are reexaminations of the material as well as the characters from both volumes of *Either/Or*. The full sense of the *Stages* is best seen when compared to the earlier work, which gives a fuller presentation of the esthetic and ethical spheres even if the later work does clarify those descriptions.

For A (the anonymous young esthete whose papers are collected in the first volume of *Either/Or*), death is something that makes the busy men of the world laughable.[16] Death is something that renders all life meaningless and insufferable, so that to be the one left alive is the greatest misfortune.[17] His own death is something he dreams of almost romantically, as if he were a disembodied witness to his own funeral.[18] In short, death is revealed, not only in the "Diapsalmata" but throughout the book, as something which one witnesses happening to others, which one imagines happening to oneself though in a detached way, and which one experiences as a sadness, a mood, which serves just as well to break up the boredom of a meaningless existence which must make its way "without God in the world."

The esthete considers death objectively, from a third person perspective. While this may evoke a strong mood or emotional reaction, the esthete never really allows death to "get to" him or her. The religious person, by contrast, considers death personally, subjectively. He agrees with Afham that the essential is not the direct, but where Afham believes the essential ideality lies in the

poetic and in mood, Kierkegaard argues that it lies in the "ennobled" view–"that is, here again it is the inner being and the thinking and the appropriation and the ennobling that are the earnestness."[19] Whereas the esthetic and objective way leads to unclarity, lethargy, and beckons one to become lost in mood, the earnest thought of death summons one back to the urgency of life's task and to the true reality before God, which life's finitudes and illusions otherwise obscure.[20]

Kierkegaard's Polemical Strategy

What did Kierkegaard gain by offering two conflicting views of death, and what did he gain by pairing them in "In Vino Veritas" and "At a Graveside" in this way? And what do we gain by reading these texts together?

To answer these questions, we must first recall the religious situation in Kierkegaard's Denmark. Kierkegaard was a dialectical and polemical writer, developing his ideas in response to (if not in opposition to) the writers of his day. Furthermore, he was a man with a mission: to reintroduce Christianity into Christendom. He did not need to encourage church attendance or other religious practices, as these were generally required by law.[21] His goal instead was to clarify the concepts of Christianity, and to make it clear to all where their own spirituality did not come up to Christian standards. An example of the muddle Kierkegaard faced can be seen in the work of one of Denmark's (and for that matter, Kierkegaard's) favorite poets: Adam Oehlenschläger.[22] Three of his greatest poems, "The Golden Horns" (1802), "The Death of Hakon Jarl" (1802), and "The Life of Jesus Christ Repeated in the Annual Cycle of Nature" (1805) deal primarily with spiritual and religious themes. Clearly, his audience (the cultured elite and their bourgeois followers) expected and appreciated such spiritualism. At the same time, the poems tend to equate Christianity, nature pantheism, and Norse paganism. If anything, orthodox Christianity is seen as an alien invader on Danish cultural soil, and as a religion suited for the mediocre rather than for the intuitive genius who is portrayed as the source of all human achievement.

"The Life of Jesus Repeated in the Annual Cycle of Nature" has a particularly interesting history. Initially, the Primate of Denmark denounced the work as pantheistic. It is after all unclear whether the poem better suggests that the life of the historical Jesus is reflected in the annual cycle or that the life of the Christ of faith really is the cycle of the year attributed to a single heroic figure. The work was only saved from a potentially disastrous condemnation for heresy when the young cleric J.P. Mynster (later Primate himself) rushed to its defense with a favorable review.[23] The subsequent Primate, H.L. Martensen, had an almost identical episode where he too was called upon to defend a poet of literary fame and questioned orthodoxy (the Hegelian and accused pantheist J.L. Heiberg), an act by which he likewise assured himself of passage into the ranks of the cultured and influential.[24] The third great church leader of that time, the reformer and political agitator N.F.S.

Grundtvig, was himself also influenced by this mixing of Christianity with Denmark's mythological past.[25] Kierkegaard thus faced the daunting task of disentangling pagan and Christian concepts and attitudes, when the popular culture and intellectual currents of the day conspired to keep them confused. An essential part of his strategy was to depict the poet, who was generally regarded by the intellectual elite of his day as much more "spiritual" than the royally appointed priests, as not really all that "spiritual" after all. The various pseudonyms of volume 1 of *Either/Or* and "In Vino Veritas" display the poet, complete with his pagan/Christian spirituality, in all his nihilistic and despairing glory. This includes their romantic, intoxicating discussions of death. It may seem as if someone who spends so much time and effort obsessing about love, death and other critical topics is indeed a very serious and profound fellow, who surely must realize what life is all about. And it may seem as if the relatively prosaic and uneducated "simple man," who knows only the earnest thought that one day he will die and meet God, really doesn't know very much at all. In fact, Kierkegaard is saying that the opposite is true: the brilliant and imaginative esthetes are in fact superficial and worldly (in every sense) while the one who may be remembered only by a few, but who lives with the earnest thought of death, is actually spiritual, enlightened, profound, and everything the salon circles in Copenhagen would have said they were seeking.

Just as Kierkegaard desired that *Either/Or* should be read in contrast to the two discourses which "accompanied" it, so too the real contrast is not between the three "stages on life's way" depicted in the pseudonymous work.[26] The starker and more meaningful contrast is between the *Stages* and the *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, and the hints this gives for understanding the rest of the authorship as well. Kierkegaard has presented these two disparate works together, forcing the reader to make (or fail to make) the effort to see the connection between them, and to puzzle out its nature. In the process, the reader may be led to consider what his or her own view of death is, and what this might say about his or her own self.

Many of Kierkegaard's potential readers would have held views which they would have considered spiritual or religious, but which he believed were merely esthetic. Others (particularly the "simple" person described in the *Postscript* and addressed in the discourses) might have held truly religious views, but were so demoralized by the praise given to the spirituality of poets and philosophers that they felt ashamed of their own unsophisticated piety. By offering his discourse on the earnest thought of death he is not only offering an "upbuilding discourse." For those readers who needed it, he is indirectly offering a standard to distinguish between the religious and the esthetic counterfeits of his day.

Living with the Earnest Thought of Death

How might an earnest thought of death affect a person living, say, here and now? On September 11, 2001, millions of Americans reportedly said to themselves, "Everything has changed." What, exactly, did they mean? Clearly, many things hadn't changed: al Qaeda had been attacking Americans and others for a while, we had already experienced terrorism in Oklahoma and even a previous attack on the Twin Towers. What changed, when those towers fell, was Americans' sense of normalcy. Life suddenly was revealed as shockingly fragile. Human accomplishments, even great monuments, were revealed as fleeting. Suddenly, it was demonstrated that nothing, including you, lasts forever. For a culture that had systematically sheltered itself from the reality of death, which so celebrated human achievement, which relied so confidently on technology to solve all problems, and which in short expected every day to be just like or even better than the day before it, this was stunning. It was, from a Kierkegaardian perspective, an extremely teachable moment. It was an apocalyptic moment. It was a moment when earnestness appeared in many lives for the first time. Anecdotal evidence suggests that people's reactions, in the days immediately following September 11th, reflected this brush with earnestness: people made decisions and commitments they had delayed before, suddenly realizing that if they delayed that marriage or career change or other risky choice too long the chance could disappear. Petty concerns that had seemed to be crucial prior to September 11th (e.g. sex scandals and drinking Presidential daughters), suddenly seemed utterly absurd. If Jerry Falwell had said on September 10 that feminists, homosexuals and pagans were weakening America and might draw God's wrath down upon the nation, it would have seemed perfectly normal; we expected and, to some degree, accepted that divisiveness, that "us versus them" sort of theology. When he said it on the 12th, it already sounded like a sad anachronism. Something new had happened and the old responses simply didn't fit.

This reading of Kierkegaard suggests that what had happened is that the genuinely religious was making an appearance. As Marcus Borg reminds us, death is the great teacher of wisdom in virtually every great religion (and perhaps some personal ones, such as Socratic uncertainty).[27] Death reveals important lessons to anyone who will heed, through the uncertainty of "when" coupled with the certainty of "if" one will die, together with the utter finality when it does come. One learns the absolute essential equality of all persons, as one sees all come to the same end, whether noble or humble. One sees the absolute importance of living life so that one focuses on activities which are intrinsically good and valuable, and the essential triviality of those actions that have value only if you should be lucky enough to live to finish them. Death shows the earnest person how precious each moment truly is, and how important it is not to delay what is truly important. It can help us realize how trivial the social demands for conformity to cultural standards are, as we see these brought to

nothing by death. While Kierkegaard has articulated these insights within a Christian framework, they are largely shared by Jewish, Buddhist, and many other traditions.

It is hardly surprising, though, that in a culture so unused to earnestness for so long, the moment passed largely unheralded and untapped. As recently as November 2003, American/Western culture continues to be obsessed with youth, denying the realities of age and death.[28] We use cosmetics and plastic surgery to hide the effects of age, which were once seen as deserving of respect. We even act as happy children, with adults riding scooters or even carrying adult-version baby bottles. Even after the harsh demonstrations of recent events, our youth-obsessed, death-denying culture continues. From a Kierkegaardian perspective, this is simply not earnest. We cannot remain children forever, nor should we seek to do so. Each of us must live up to our responsibilities, must strive to realize the good, and must above all remember that one day all of this will end and each one will pass into eternity, leaving one's toys and one's cosmetically enhanced body behind and taking only one's self, one's character. This is a disquieting thought, and few wish to dwell with it.

As philosophers, we should dwell with it, and encourage others to do so. Politicians called on us to return to normalcy as quickly as possible, and in a sense Kierkegaard might agree. His notion of earnestness has no patience with moping or worrying, or sinking into anxious paralysis. It is about living life; but in living life, one must not ignore its finitude. Earnestness calls forth life of purposeful action, not frivolousness. As Kierkegaard says of the earnest deceased:

> He was a citizen of the town here; a hard worker in his modest occupation, he disturbed know one by disregarding his civic obligations, disturbed no one by misplaced concern about the whole. So it went year after year, uniformly but not emptily. . . . He recollected God and became proficient in his work; he recollected God and became joyful in his work and joyful in his life; he recollected God and became happy in his modest home with his dear ones; he disturbed no one by indifference to public worship, disturbed no one by untimely zeal, but God's house was to him a second home—and now he has gone home.[29]

This earnest man was not, apparently, a philosopher in the academic sense, but he was a "lover of wisdom" in the truest sense. His honest appraisal of himself and life, and of the reality of death and the possibility of being asked for an accounting of how one has spent one's limited share of time, inspired him in all he did. He did not, as other "inspired" people, lose sleep contemplating Alexander's conquests and thus seek fame and accomplishment. He simply lived with the social relations and personal talents he developed or found himself to have and did what was right and best with these. Doubtless, when the English fleet bombarded Copenhagen during its war against Napoleon, a man such as this took shelter as any sane man would, but he did not panic as if the

world was ending, or find the nearest English traveler to shoot in blind rage. He would have responded to this crisis as he did to the rest of his life: by living. Since the thought of death was nothing new to him, he was ready to respond to the threat as it happened, and to live again after it had passed.

We cannot go back to "normal," if that means avoiding the earnest thought of death. The Western obsession with indefinitely prolonging youth is an obvious esthetic falsehood. It is less obvious that many forms of apocalypticism are likewise esthetic, though the earnest thought of death can reveal this. Earnestness takes death seriously, so any "religion" which seeks to make the Afterlife or the Apocalypse a time for worldly wishes to come true is merely esthetic.[30] A religion which fails to recollect that each individual will have to stand before God (and instead teaches, for example, that true believers are raptured into Heaven while only those with flawed beliefs are "left behind") turns death (or the death of the world) into a spectator sport; while earnestness teaches that *you* are going to *die*.

Even in the secular realm, there are numerous ways one can seek to evade the lessons of earnestness, either in despair or defiance. It is not just consumer culture that seeks to ignore and hide death, and not just shallow religion that seeks to ignore its reality. Gordon Marino points out that even Freudianism, which makes its goal the facing of stark reality without hiding behind comforting delusions, generally ignores the reality of death and the lessons it teaches.[31] Here is a life philosophy that claims to face the harsh realities of life and lead to a healthier, more vigorous, harmoniously functioning self, yet its adherents do this largely by overlooking the greatest universal reality (Freud's "death instinct" notwithstanding). If this understanding of human nature cannot deal with death, it suggests the further question of whether any life-view that is not truly religious can do so. Kierkegaard himself clearly believed in a life after death, even as he staunchly refused to describe it or allow it to become a source of wish fulfillment.[32] Indeed, it is hard to imagine how secular culture could see death as anything other than ultimately "sinister."[33] A view that seeks meaning in fulfillment in this life will have to see death as the ultimate denial and frustration of life. To Kierkegaard, this shows that this life is not in fact the final goal or truest standard. The "before God" which he urges the reader to recollect is what gives life meaning, and allows one to dwell with the earnest thought of death. On the other hand, the earnest thought of death is clearly not the exclusive property of any one tradition, or even of theism alone. Buddhism, a non-theistic religion, has long recognized the importance of death and its lessons on the nature of life. Clearly other life-views could also appropriate this earnestness, possibly without even defining themselves as "religious."

As odd as it may sound, the earnest thought of death can be comforting and empowering, by Kierkegaard's description. It teaches one to accept finitude (and the risk that goes with it) as an unavoidable part of life. It also teaches that finitude makes the time one does have (and one's own

little corner of the world) all the more precious. The earnest thought of death teaches that one cannot grasp life forever, but neither should one waste what one has. It can teach one how to avoid some of the counterfeits of earnestness that seem serious, but which never really think death through. The earnest thought of death is true, which should be enough to recommend it to all "lovers of wisdom." Anxious times make earnestness all the more necessary, and can make some people more receptive to its lessons. But it does not come easily to anyone, and must be recollected constantly even if once "learned." It is not so much a fact or a doctrine as it is a discipline, or a virtue: one particularly worth cultivating when life suddenly seems much more uncertain, and much less frivolous than it did before.

Notes

[1] Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way: Studies by Various Persons;* ed. and trans. with intro. and notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1988), xi; also Søren Kierkegaard, *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*; ed. and trans. with intro. and notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993) x-xi.

[2] W. M. Alexander, *Johan Georg Hamann: Philosophy and Faith* (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hauge, 1966) 51-53.

[3] *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* 71-3.

[4] *Stages* 9-11.

[5] William Afham's essay, unlike the discourse, discusses and defines the concept "recollection." Recollection is said to be "ideality" which "wants to maintain for a person the eternal continuity in life" (*Stages* 10). Remembering concerns itself with details, but recollection "draws on the eternal." "Only the essential can be recollected" (*Stages* 12). One who has had one idea through his whole life is able to recollect; one who has grown old with many small and partial thoughts has nothing to recollect, nothing essential or unifying in his or her life, though perhaps that one has quite a bit to remember. Recollection is an art, says Afham: the art of experiencing the essential and poetic in what is remembered, and even in what is present (*Stages* 12-13). Thus, one may develop the "art" to recollect one's home even though one has never left it, to forget the immediate reality in order to experience its ideality.

The setting of "In Vino Veritas" certainly recalls Plato's *Symposium*, and the topic of recollection suggests Plato as well. See Robert E. Wood, "Recollection and Two Banquets: Plato's and Kierkegaard's," *The International Kierkegaard Commentary, v. 11: Stages on Life's Way*; ed. Robert L. Perkins (Mercer UP, Macon, GA, 2000) 49-68. However, it may be the differences between Plato and Afham that are most instructive. For Plato, the primary objects of recollection are eternal truths: geometric principles that underlie physical reality, universal concepts that underlie the diverse variety of physical objects, the Good that underlies the multitude of human opinions on morality and value. Afham affirms that "In recollection, a person draws on the eternal" but not that a person recollects the eternal (*Stages* 11). He affirms as Plato would that recollection requires reflection, but adds that it also requires proficiency in illusion (*Stages* 12-13). A recollection must be happy, says Afham, and so the "exhilarated mood of the participants, the hubbub of the conviviality, the effervescent zest of the champagne" are the objects of his interest (*Stages* 9, 15). Plato would have said that recollection aims at the truth behind illusion, that one ought to strip away illusion, and that in fact it can be unpleasant and painful (as when his mythical prisoner escapes from the cave and stumbles into the true light of the sun). For Plato, sensations such as taste or hearing are not objects of recollection, but are at best occasions for recalling the fundamental principles that underlie and unite them. While Afham too claims that recollection concerns itself with the ideality of the thing recollected, it seems to be more the sort of ideality which Constantin's young friend lost

himself in when he was set adrift on the sea of the infinite to become a poet. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. and trans. with intro. and notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1983) 221-22. For him too the "idea" is also intoxicating, emotional, turbulent even. Just as for the banqueters the "idea" carries them further and further from the world, from woman, from believing in the reality of love, and finally leads all their separate ways from one another, so too does the young man's idea give him a poet's existence, ultimately estranged from the girl and all other finite relationships (like the Seducer, he would use the word "entanglements"). And just as Afham says that one recollects with the help of the eternal, so too does Constantin affirm that his young friend who is so adrift upon the idea, the newly minted poet, is not truly religious but only has a religious resonance which never actually breaks through. That is, the poet does not fully and consciously relate to the eternal, but only as an inexplicable underpinning for his idealized understanding of actuality (*Repetition* 228-230). As Constantin writes:

> If he had had a deeper religious background, he would not have become a poet. Then everything would have gained religious meaning . . . Then he would have acted with an entirely different iron consistency and imperturbability, then he would have won a fact of consciousness to which he could constantly hold, one that would never become ambivalent for him but would be pure earnestness because it was established by him on the basis of a God-relationship. . . . Then with religious fear and trembling, but also with faith and trust, he would understand what he had done from the very beginning and what as a consequence of this he was obligated to do later, even though this obligation would have strange results. It is characteristic of the young man, however, precisely as a poet, that he can never really grasp what he has done, simply because he both wants to see it and does not want to see it in the external and the visible, or wants to see it and does not want to see it. A religious individual, however, is composed within himself and rejects all childish pranks of actuality. (*Repetition* 229-230)

It is clear that the poet more closely resembles Afham's vision of recollection in his relationship to the idea. Even Constantin, with his limited understanding of earnestness or the eternal, knows that the truly religious person who has allowed the eternal to really get hold of him or her will behave very differently from one who has followed the poet's call. To an external observer (particularly an uninformed one) the poet will seem to be more spiritually aware than the common shopkeeper or craftsman who is Kierkegaard's model of the earnest one who "recollects God."

If one compares Constantin's descriptions of his young poet friend versus the religiously earnest person, it is pretty clear which one most resembles Socrates as Plato describes him. The one who seeks the idea in Plato's sense will be calm, sober, and have the "iron consistency." It is also fairly clear, if one compares the young poet's writings to Afham's (cf. *Repetition* 221-22; *Stages* 10, 17-

18) that Afham is closer to the poet than to Socrates, Plato or Kierkegaard, personally and in his view of recollection. He may have realized much that is important about recollection, but like other Kierkegaardian pseudonyms he has misunderstood much as well; and the misunderstandings are perhaps more instructive than the understanding.

[6] *Stages* 21.

[7] *Three Discourses* 73-6.

[8] *Three Discourses* 72.

[9] *Three Discourses* 78.

[10] *Stages* 28.

[11] *Three Discourses* 82-85.

[12] *Three Discourses* 83-84.

[13] *Stages* 53-55.

[14] *Stages* 59-63.

[15] *Three Discourses* 75.

[16] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, v. 1, ed. and trans. with intro and notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1987) 25.

[17] *Either/Or* v. 1, 29.

[18] *Either/Or* v. 1, 40.

[19] *Three Discourses* 74.

[20] *Three Discourses* 83-84.

[21] Bruce H. Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana UP, 1990) 27-28.

[22] *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark* 86-97.

[23] *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark* 92, 108-117.

[24] *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark* 145-152, 181-184.

[25] *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark* 199-202.

[26] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for my Work as an Author: a Report to History*, trans. with intro. and notes by Walter Lowrie, ed. and preface by Benjamin Nelson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 11.

[27] Marcus Borg, "Death as the Teacher of Wisdom" *The Christian Century* (Feb. 26, 1986) 203-06.

[28] Laurie Zoloth, "The Care of the Dying in America: The Ethics and Theology of Hair Dye, Botox, and Prozac (presented at the 2003 meeting of the AAR on November 23, 2003 in Atlanta, Ga).

[29] *Three Discourses* 71-72.

[30] Borg 206.

[31] Gordon Daniel Marino, *Kierkegaard in the Present Age*, preface by Phillip Rieff (Milwaukee, WI, Marquette UP, 2001): 80-81.

[32] Marino 63-64.

[33] Julia Watkins, "Kierkegaard's View of Death;" *History of European Ideas* 12.1 (1990): 68.

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