

THE SENSE OF DEATH IN TOLSTOY AND KIERKEGAARD*

By

MICHAEL K. MACRAKIS, M.A., Ph. D.

III

COMPARISON BETWEEN TOLSTOY AND KIERKEGAARD

We begin with a legend, the legend of Narcissus. Who was Narcissus?...

According to Ovid's narration, he was a young beautiful man who one day... But, why must we repeat this legend? Narcissus is already well known to us for we began the two previous parts of our essay with his legend. And we found there his similarity with Tolstoy (Part I) and Kierkegaard (Part II), the similarity which exists also between both Tolstoy and Kierkegaard, that is, their subjectivism in art and thought. This similarity, as we said then, is very important. For this reason, it must be taken into consideration by everyone who wants to examine Tolstoy or Kierkegaard on every subject related to them, and even more on the subject of death. But, especially concerning death, which is the main subject of our essay, there are between them some other similarities as well, and also some differences. These similarities and differences, then, we are now going to see immediately in two separate sections.

A. Similarities

In comparing Kierkegaard with Tolstoy we find at first a great similarity which determines in general the whole content of our essay and gives to it its own title. This similarity is the sense of death which in both Kierkegaard and Tolstoy is equally intensive. The result of this intensive sense is the conception of death as something which annihilates completely the «concrete» individual, and also the great despair created by this annihilation.

1. Death in «Concrete» or «Subjective» Sense in Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan Ilyitch and Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript.

The reason why Tolstoy and Kierkegaard feel death in so intensive a sense is not only the exterior events, that is, the succession

* Continuation from *Theologia*, No. 53, January-March 1982, p. 226.

of deaths which both faced in their families, but also their strong individuality.

Though Tolstoy, in opposition to Kierkegaard¹, generally denies in his philosophical doctrine the individual², he himself, as B. Zenkovsky remarks, «possessed an individuality particularly strong»³. Concerning his own person, we can especially see Tolstoy's individualism in the case of death in which he emphasizes so greatly the relation of death to the individual and the conception of death in a concrete sense. It is this conception of death that Tolstoy appears to have in his *Confession* where he feels death for himself in a concrete sense and sees the destruction which death brings to his own individual. «My life», he says, «came to a standstill. I could breathe, eat, drink, and sleep, and I could not help doing these things; but there was no life, for there were no wishes the fulfilment of which I could consider reasonable... I could not even wish to know the truth, for I guessed of what it consisted. The truth was that life is meaningless. I had as it were lived, lived, and walked, walked, till I had come to a precipice and saw clearly that there was nothing ahead of me but destruction. It was impossible to stop, impossible to go back, and impossible to close my eyes or avoid seeing that there was nothing ahead but suffering and real death—complete annihilation»⁴.

A characteristic example of this destruction and annihilation which death brings to the individual as a «concrete» is *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch* (1886) in which Tolstoy puts in an existential manner⁵ the experience from his own torment that he had felt before in his *Confession*.

In this short but so important book⁶ which begins with the an-

1. So strong is individuality in Kierkegaard that he writes in his *Journals*: «Had I to crave an inscription on my grave I would ask for none other than 'the individual'» (*The Journals of Kierkegaard*, p. 133).

2. In his denial of individual Tolstoy was influenced by Spinoza, and especially by Schopenhauer (See A. Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille and Vorstellung*, *op. cit.*, Bk. IV, § 54, p. 390).

3. «Tolstoy himself possessed an individuality particularly strong» (B. Zenkovsky, *Histoire de la Philosophie russe*, vol. 1, p. 436).

4. Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession*, ch. IV, pp. 17-18.

5. William Barrett, among others, has called the story of this book «something of a basic scripture for existential thought» (See W. V. Spanos, *op. cit.*, p. 11).

6. According to V. V. Stasov, «there is no nation in any part of earth to possess a work so genius. Everything is small, poor, in comparison with these seventy pages» (Stasov's letter to Tolstoy, April 28, 1886; see *Perepiska L. N. Tolstovo s V.V. Stasovym*, Leningrad 1829).

nouncement of the death of Ivan Ilyitch, whose «history was the simplest, the most ordinary, and the most awful»¹, Tolstoy makes the contrast of death in a general sense with death in a concrete sense. This contrast appears at the very beginning of the book with the announcement of Ivan Ilyitch's death in the judicial council in which «the very fact of the death of an intimate acquaintance excited in every one who heard of it, as such a fact always does, a feeling of relief that 'it is he that is dead, and not I'. 'Only think! he is dead, but here am I all right', each one thought or felt»². And among all these so-called friends of Ivan Ilyitch the most representative type who thought and felt death in such a general sense was certainly the man who first announced to the council this tragic event and who happened to be the most intimate friend of the deceased. This man was Pyotr Ivanovitch who, going to the funeral service and paying the widow a visit of condolence, saw in the facial expression of the corpse «a reproach or a reminder for the living. This reminder seemed to Pyotr Ivanovitch uncalled for, or, at least, to have nothing to do with him»³.

However, not only Ivan Ilyitch's friends, and especially the most intimate of them, but even the closest members of his family such as his wife, his daughter and his son thought and felt like this at his death. Even Ivan Ilyitch himself, if any one of them had died before him, would feel the same: «It is he that is dead, and not I». But, how differently Ivan Ilyitch felt when, after his visit to the doctor, he knew that death did not concern other men in general but himself in particular. «At the bottom of his heart Ivan Ilyitch knew that he was dying; but so far from growing used to this idea, he simply did not grasp it — he was utterly unable to grasp it. The example of the syllogism that he had learned in Kisewetter's logic — Gaius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Gaius is mortal — had seemed to him all his life correct only as regards Gaius, but not at all as regards himself. In that case it was a question of Gaius, a man, an abstract man, and it was perfectly true, but he was not Gaius, and was not an abstract man; he had always been a creature quite, quite different from all others; he had been little Vanya with a mamma and papa... And Gaius certainly was mortal, and it was right for him to die; but for me, little Vanya, Ivan Ilyitch, with

1. Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch*, ch. II, p. 10.

2. *Ibid.*, ch. I, p. 2.

3. *Ibid.*, ch. I, p. 6.

all my feelings and ideas — for me it's a different matter. And it cannot be that I ought to die. That would be too awful...»¹.

How does this distinction of Gaius as an abstract man from little Vanya as a concrete man remind us of Kierkegaard's similar distinction of death in a general sense from death in a concrete sense which we find in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*? In this book, as we said, Kierkegaard speaks about Soldin, the absent-minded book-dealer. To this man and all those absent-minded people, who feel death in a general and «objective» sense, Kierkegaard contrasts the men of his own category who feel death in a particular and «subjective» sense, that is, death as something which concerns their own subject. To this category of men Ivan Ilyitch also belongs. In the case of his hero Tolstoy understands death in a «subjective» sense though in his book he does not go so far as Kierkegaard, in whom this «subjective» death takes in its extension the form of self-mortification in a stage which is called by Kierkegaard the *Religious* stage. Tolstoy limits the «subjective» death, in its concrete sense, only to what Kierkegaard calls the *Aesthetic* stage, whose highest point is *despair*².

2. *The Despair of Ivan Ilyitch and Tolstoy's Conclusion: «Death Is Better than Life».*

We find despair as a main characteristic of Ivan Ilyitch who «saw that he was dying, and was in continual despair»³. This despair is a natural consequence of his thought and sense of death in a concrete sense, a result of his consciousness of the destruction which death brings to his individual. Under this impression he can not sleep whole nights like that night, for example, in which he is despairingly tormented by these thoughts: «I shall be no more, then what will there be? There'll

1. *Ibid.*, ch. VI, p. 41.

2. Generally, Kierkegaard distinguishes three stages of existence or «Stages on Life's Way» (this is the title of one of his books), as he himself calls them. These stages corresponded to the three periods of Kierkegaard's life and, determined by his relation to the opposite sex, are, according to Kierkegaard himself, «an aesthetic, an ethical, and a religious stage» (*Stages on Life's Way*; see *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. by R. Bretall, p. 172). Now, the *Aesthetic* stage is characterized by Kierkegaard as a stage of melancholy and of imagination, for «imagination is always melancholy». «Melancholy in its maximum is despair» (*Either/Or*, vol. 1, p. xi). «Every aesthetic view of life is despair» (*Either/Or*, vol. 2, p. 197).

3. L. Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch*, ch. VI, p. 41.

be nothing. Where then shall I be when I am no more? Can this be dying? No; I don't want to!' He jumped up, tried to light the candle... 'Death. Yes, death... Can it be death?' A horror came over him, grasping for breath... And in despair, breathless, he fell back on his spine waiting for death to come that instant»¹.

This despair is not once only. Each time when the pain in his kidney comes to remind him of his death he feels the same despair. «Always the same thing again and again, all these endless days and nights»². «Always the same. A gleam of hope flashes for a moment, then again the sea of despair roars about him again»³. Always the same until the moment when he began his desperate scream «that never ceased for three days, and was so awful that through two closed doors one could not hear it without horror... 'Oo! Oo-o! Oo!' he screamed in varying intonations. He had begun screaming, 'I don't want to!' and so had gone on screaming on the same vowel sound—ool»⁴. And this scream continued for three days until the moment when, finally, death *itself* came to liberate him from *its* agony. «Death is over», he said to himself. «It's no more»⁵.

This question of death brings Tolstoy himself to the same despair, a despair which in the *Confession* appears to lead him to the point of suicide. «It had come to this», he says, «that I, a healthy, fortunate man, felt I could no longer live: some irresistible power impelled me to rid myself one way or other of life. I cannot say I *wished* to kill

1. *Ibid.*, ch. V, pp. 39-40. This desperate night of Ivan Ilyitch reminds us of that autumn evening in *Anna Karenina* in which Levin, under the impression of his consumptive brother Nikolai, who was to die, cannot sleep, thinking of his death. «He sat on his bed in the dark, doubled his arms round his knees and thought ...that Death would come and end everything, so that it was useless to begin anything, and that there was no help for it. Yes, it was terrible, but true. 'But I am still alive: what am I do now? What am I to do?' he said despairingly. He lit a candle, got up carefully, went to the looking-glass, and began examining his face and hair. Yes! There were grey hairs on his temples. He opened his mouth: his double teeth were beginning to decay. He bared his muscular arms. Yes, he was very strong. But Nicholas, who was breathing there with the remains of his lungs, had once had a healthy body too» (*Anna Karenina*, Bk. I, ch. XXXI, pp. 396-397). However, the position of Levin who is still alive is different from that of Ivan Ilyitch who is to die. But, the similarity exists in the fact that both are in despair, because they feel death in a concrete sense. This feeling makes them conscious of the destruction which death brings to their individuality.

2. L. Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch*, ch. VIII, p. 50.

3. *Ibid.*, ch. VIII, p. 51; see also ch. IX, p. 60.

4. *Ibid.*, ch. XII, p. 65.

5. *Ibid.*, ch. XII, p. 67.

myself. The power which drew me away from life was stronger, fuller and more widespread than any mere wish. It was a force similar to the former striving to live, only in a contrary direction... And it was then that I, a man favoured by fortune, hid a cord from myself lest I should hang myself from the crosspiece of the partition in my room where I undressed alone every evening, and I ceased to go out shooting with a gun lest I should be tempted by so easy a way of ending my life. I did not myself know what I wanted: I feared life, desired to escape from it, yet still hoped something of it»¹.

«My question —that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide— », he says again in another page of his *Confession*, «was the simplest of questions... It was a question without an answer to which one cannot live, as I had found by experience. It was: 'Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?'»².

Without finding in science any answer to the question which had brought him to despair, Tolstoy began to observe how the people around him lived and what their attitude was to this question. So he found that people had four different attitudes towards death:

«The first was that of ignorance». These kind of people, as he explains, are ignorant of death and they do not see «the dragon that awaits them» but «they lick the drops of honey» in the joys of life³.

«The second way out is epicureanism». The people in this position know that the «dragon of death» awaits them but they are indifferent to it, and they throw themselves into the joys of life⁴. This position could be better expressed by the words which St. Paul uses for this kind of people than those of Solomon which Tolstoy uses. These words of St. Paul are: «Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die»⁵.

«The third escape is that of strength and energy. It consists in

1. L. Tolstoy, *A Confession*, ch. IV, p. 18. Before the *Confession*, in *Anna Karenina* Tolstoy had already put this agony of death in Levin who, happy and the father of a family, avoided taking any gun in his hand fearing that he should kill himself. Tolstoy, as R. Rolland remarks, «wrote the hidden tragedy of his generation» which around 1880 in Europe, and especially in Russia had an inclination toward suicide (R. Rollan, *Vie de Tolstoï*, p. 82n.).

2. L. Tolstoy, *A Confession*, ch. V, p. 24.

3. *Ibid.*, ch. VII, p. 39.

4. *Ibid.*

5. 1 Corinth. 15:32.

destroying life, when one has understood that it is an evil and an absurdity»¹.

«The fourth way out is that of weakness... People of this kind know that death is better than life, but not having the strength to act rationally —to end the deception quickly and kill themselves— they seem to wait for something»².

Among the people of this last kind Tolstoy reckons himself³. He knew that «death is better than life» but he did not decide to kill himself.

3. *The Wandering Jew as the Personification of Despair and Kierkegaard's Conclusion: «Death Is for us the Greatest Happiness».*

Similar to Tolstoy's attitude towards death but to a more extreme degree is that of Kierkegaard in the first volume of *Either/Or*. Tolstoy simply thought, when he was in that desperate position which he describes in his *Confession*, that «death is better than life», but Kierkegaard goes further and arrives at the conclusion, a really strange conclusion, that «death is for us the greatest happiness»⁴. And, if death is for man the greatest happiness, then one can suspect who is the «Unhappiest Man». About this man Kierkegaard talks in a short essay by this title in *Either/Or*⁵.

Kierkegaard wrote this essay in the literary form of «an enthusiastic address before the Sympanecromenoi»⁶ taking as his motive a brief inscription which distinguishes a grave somewhere in England, the inscription which gave also the title to this essay: «The Unhappiest Man»⁷. Calling back to his mind this inscription, he opens the grave before the eyes of our imagination and says: «Lo, the tomb is empty! There is no trace of a body». And he asks: «Is he perhaps risen from the dead? Has he perhaps wished to nock the poet's word:

1. L. Tolstoy, *A Confession*, ch. VII, p. 41.

2. *Ibid.*

3. «I found myself in that category» (*Ibid.*). See the whole chapter VII in which Tolstoy speaks in general about the four different attitudes towards death.

4. S. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 1, p. 165.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 214-228.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 217. «The epitaph», as the translator notes, «really exists in Worcester. Chateaubriant mentions this» (p. 452).

...In the grave there is peace,
Its silent dweller from grief knows release.

Did he find no rest, not even in the grave; does he perhaps wander restlessly about in the world?»¹ Is he a wandering man? Is this man the Wandering Jew? Yes, at the empty tomb maybe we must search for him, the unhappiest man, «for we, dear Symparanecromenoi», the speaker says, «we, like the Roman soldiers, fear not death; we know of greater misfortunes, and first and last and above all—life. If indeed there were some human being who could not die, if the story told of the Wandering Jew be true, then how could we hesitate to declare him the unhappiest man? Then we could also explain why the tomb was empty, in order to signify, namely, that the unhappiest man was the one who could not die, could not slip down into a grave. The case would be decided, the answer easy: for the unhappiest man was the one who could not die, the happy, he who could; happy he who died in his old age, happier, whoever died in his youth, happiest he who died at birth, happiest of all he who never was born...»².

The essay from which we quoted the above long passage, as every other essay in the first volume of *Either / Or* refers to the Aesthetic stage, and, therefore, the man who makes his address to Symparanecromenoi is an Aestheticist, that is, a man who arrives at his conclusion about death from great despair since, according to Kierkegaard, «every aesthetic view of life is despair»³.

Generally, the Aesthetic stage is characterized by melancholy, which melancholy also characterizes Kierkegaard himself, especially in the Aesthetic stage of his life. Now, this «melancholy in its maximum is despair»⁴ which is the highest point of the Aesthetic. This despair constitutes the subject of the *Sickness unto Death*⁵ in which Kierkegaard identifies it with sin. «Despair», he says, «is sin»⁶. «Sin is the potentiation of despair»⁷. Therefore, sin and despair are one and the same. The

1. *Ibid.*, p. 217.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 218-219.

3. S. Kierkegaard, *Either / Or*, vol. 2, p. 197.

4. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. xi (Translator's Preface).

5. This work, one of the most important works of Kierkegaard, was published on July 30, 1849.

6. See the second part of Kierkegaard's work, *The Sickness unto Death*, pp. 208ff.

7. *Ibid.*, 208.

difference only is the one is conscious while the other is unconscious. When the person who is in despair begins to be conscious of it, then this despair in him becomes sin.

Under this distinction between conscious and unconscious despair we must also understand the position of Kierkegaard himself when in his *Journals* (April 24, 1848) he speaks of a terrible melancholy which in his earliest youth threw him for a time into sin and debauchery¹. This «terrible melancholy» which is «melancholy in its maximum» in the years of «perdition», and therefore «despair» becomes sin in his eyes because in the year 1848², when he writes the above lines in his *Journals*, he is conscious of the despair of his youth, that is, of his sins. From these sins, then, of the period of «perdition» Kierkegaard tries in that year, that is in his *Religious* period, to purify himself by self-mortification. And it is exactly this mortification that makes Kierkegaard differ from Tolstoy on the subject of death. But let us see now in the sequel this or any other difference between them on their attitude towards death.

B. Differences

In our examination of similarities between Kierkegaard and Tolstoy on the sense of death we found two main similarities: 1) Both think of death and feel its power in a concrete sense in contrast to death in a general or abstract sense, and 2) the question of death leads both, Kierkegaard and Tolstoy, to despair. And, as we said, the first similarity derives from the succession of deaths that both faced in their families and especially from their strong individuality, while the second similarity, on the other hand, is a natural consequence of the first since the man who feels death in a concrete sense feels it also as a destruction of the individual as a «concrete». For this reason, these two similarities are essentially one and the same. Both refer to the sense of death which in both Kirkegaard and Tolstoy is equally strong.

However, in spite of this similarity, there is a great difference between them, the difference which determines in particular the content of the two previous parts of this essay: first, «The Contrast of Death to Life in Tolstoy»; and second, «The Identity of Death with Life in Kierkegaard». This difference derives from the different solu-

1. *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, p. 141.

2. In the year 1848, as Kierkegaard writes in his *Journals*, he was at the zenith of his religious life: «Now I am in faith in the profoundest sense» (*Ibid.*, p. 142).

tion which each of these two philosophers gives to the problem of death in relation to life. But, let us make here clearer what exactly constitutes the difference in their solutions.

1. *The Contrast of Death to Life in Tolstoy.*

Though Kierkegaard and Tolstoy, as we said, coincide in the succession of deaths in their families, they repel each other like opposite poles as concerns the conditions of their life, hereditary conditions and acquired conditions. These conditions are so different that they could characterize life in the case of Tolstoy as «happiness» and in the case of Kierkegaard as «suffering».

Tolstoy came from a famous family whose maternal ancestors went as far back as Peter the Great. Besides his aristocratic name he had a large estate in Yasnaya Poliana where he could live financially independent and in direct contact with Nature on which so much of Tolstoy's happiness depended, as he wrote in his *Cossacks*: «Happiness is being with Nature, seeing her, and conversing with her»¹. This deep feeling of Nature, as we have said, is related to his strong health and unique vitality. There are a few only who could have such health as did Tolstoy, who lived so long a time—he died at the age of eighty-two—without ever, during all those years of his long life, suffering from any serious disease. His vitality was unique: a vitality which was manifested so early in his life by a strong sensibility. It was this sensibility that made him put himself entirely into everything. And, it was this vitality that pushed him to rush with such violence and passion into the joys of life. «Tolstoy», as J. Lavrin remarks, «was brimming over with vitality, with passion and the joy of life»².

To these natural conditions of his life we must add also the acquired conditions if we would like to shape a complete picture of Tolstoy's life. Such an acquired condition, for example, is his family happiness, at least during the first fifteen years which followed immediately after his marriage, and the fame of a great writer, passibly the greatest in the nineteenth century, and not only in Russia but outside Russia, as well.

About all these natural and required goods, he writes in his *Confession* as follows: «I was not yet fifty; I had a good wife who loved

1. L. Tolstoy, *The Cossacks*, trans. by Maude, ch. xxxiii, p. 188.

2. J. Lavrin, *Tolstoy: An Approach*, p. 81.

me and whom I loved, good children, and a large estate which without much effort on my part improved and increased. I was respected by my relations and acquaintances more than at any previous time. I was praised by others and without much self-deception could consider that my name was famous. And far from being insane or mentally diseased, I enjoyed on the contrary a strength of mind and body such as I have seldom met with among men of my kind; physically I could keep up with the peasants at mowing, and mentally I could work for eight and ten hours at a stretch without experiencing any ill results from such exertion. And in this situation I came to this — that I could not live, and, fearing death, had to employ cunning with myself to avoid taking my own life»¹.

If Tolstoy did not love life so much, he would not certainly have felt the power of death in such a strong sense. His lust for life made him put all his interest in this material world and to make his happiness dependent on earthly goods. For this reason, his fear of death derives from the fact that he sees death as a destruction of the individual not so much in a metaphysical as in a physical sense. As J. Lavrin remarks, «it was not so much the metaphysical as the physical and biological fear of death that overwhelmed him with a despair which was really nothing else but his inverted and fullblooded love of happiness and of life... His gradual orientation towards death was all the more crushing because of his enormous vitality. It was the vitality of a materialist who secretly believed only in this world and was sceptical of any 'beyond', while knowing full well that everything existing in this world is doomed to perish. The very exuberance of his joy of life thus turned against itself. It degenerated into hatred of life, into negation and despair»².

Generally, in Tolstoy, as we see, there is a contrast of death to life³ though Marie Sémon, seeing the writer's case from another aspect, believes that there is in him, especially after his spiritual crisis (1880c.), «an identity between life and death»⁴ for, according to her,

1. Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession*, ch. IV, pp. 18-19.

2. J. Lavrin, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

3. Besides J. Lavrin and others, see also S. Zweig who in a special chapter of his book on Tolstoy treats of «Tolstoy's vitality and its opposite [i.e. death]» (S. Zweig, *Tolstoi* pp. 23-48).

4. Marie Sémon, «La femme témoin des sacrements de vie et de mort, dans l'œuvre de Tolstoï», in *Tolstoï aujourd'hui*, Paris, Institut d'Études Slaves, 1980, p. 136.

«Tolstoy unites birth and death in a unique sacrament, that of the Life»¹. But the real identity, as we ourselves understand it in this essay, exists in Kierkegaard and not in Tolstoy².

2. *The Identity of Death with Life in Kierkegaard.*

In opposition to Tolstoy, Kierkegaard identifies death and life. This difference derives from conditions which are different in Kierkegaard from those in Tolstoy. First, as concerns their health, Kierkegaard is the opposite of Tolstoy. From very early in his life he suffered from a natural weakness. And it was this weakness which led him so early to the death — he died at half of Tolstoy's age, at the age of only forty-two. «There can be no doubt», says W. Lowrie, «that Sören was a very frail child, and whatever his malady may have been, it pursued him to the end, probably occasioning his early death. It is perhaps most plausibly attributed to a marked curvature of the spine, occasioned, as he believed, by a fall from a tree in early childhood. Some sort of spinal trouble was the vague diagnosis of the hospital, whither he was carried from the street after a fall which was the result of paralysis, and where he died in a few weeks»³.

These bad conditions of his health in connection with the atmosphere of death in which he had lived from the very beginning of his life transported to him a terrible melancholy, a melancholy which, according to his expression, became through his whole life his «most faithful mistress». It was this melancholy which threw him in early youth into the despair of the sin and debauchery and which a few years later flung him down into its abyss by having to break off his engagement with Regina Olsen⁴. He never married. In his whole life he remained a single man without ever feeling the caress of a devoted wife and without ever tasting family happiness, the happiness of a man with a lovely woman in the midst of many children, as Tolstoy lived at least during the first fifteen years of his family life. Kierkegaard always lived alone with the companionship of his most faithful mistress — melancholy. And besides this, he was constantly accompanied by the idea of death, the idea that he could not live beyond thirty-four.

1. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

2. Comp. M. K. Macrakis, *The Sense of Death and the Longing for Redemption in Leo Tolstoy*, pp. 88n., 90n., 195-227 (in Greek).

3. W. Lowrie, *A Short Life of Kierkegaard*, pp. 40-41.

4. *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, p. 141.

Considering all these hard conditions of Kierkegaard's life, we can understand why he wrote: «I am in the deepest sense an unfortunate individual who has from the earliest age been nailed fast to one suffering or another, to the very verge of insanity, which may have its deeper ground in a disproportion between my soul and my body»¹. We can see, then, that in opposition to Tolstoy, in whom the sense of death is contrasted to the strength of his health, in Kierkegaard the sense of death is in absolute agreement with his natural weakness. «The sense of his physical inferiority», remarks W. Lowrie, for Kierkegaard «was an acute distress throughout his whole life. He commonly spoke of it as 'disproportion between my soul and my body'»².

Indeed, all of Kierkegaard's life, we can say, was a continuous suffering so that in his *Journals* he speaks again and again from the very beginning about pain and suffering.

And it is this suffering that made his life a continuous preparation for death, that is, a self-mortification: «to live as though dead (dead to the world)»³. This mortification through suffering obliged him to place his hopes and interests in another life and not as Tolstoy in this life which, for Kierkegaard, did not differ at all from death itself. Life and death in Kierkegaard are identical.

3. The Determination of the Difference between Tolstoy and Kierkegaard by their Relation to the «Absolute» (Kierkegaard's Similarity to Dostoevsky).

The difference between Kierkegaard and Tolstoy as concerns their attitude towards death is determined by the difference which characterizes them in their relation to the *Absolute*. Both Kierkegaard and Tolstoy are absolutists but they differ from each other in the fact that the former searches for the absolute in the eternal world which is the really absolute world, a world without the limitations of place and time, a world without beginning and end, while the latter searches for the absolute in this temporal world which is a relative and finite world. «Tolstoy's philosophic searchings», says B. Zenkovsky, «followed their

1. I quote this saying of Kierkegaard from W. Lowrie's work *A Short Life of Kierkegaard*, p. 42.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

3. *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, 254.

own specific dialectic, whose point of departure was an intuitive-intellectual perception of the inseparability and indivisibility of temporal and eternal, relative and Absolute... The good must be Absolute or it is not good—such is the result of Tolstoy's searchings¹. It is Tolstoy's «thirst for an authentic and absolute good» that makes him submit to a kind of «self-crucifixion». «Tolstoy», according to B. Zenkovsky again, «was the martyr of his own ideas which tormented his consciousness, destroyed his life and his relations with his family, with his neighbors, with all culture»².

In opposition to Tolstoy, whose drama consists in his endeavors to find the absolute in the temporal, Kierkegaard, as we said, pursues the attainment of the absolute in eternity. «I choose the absolute», he says. «And what is the absolute? It is I myself in my eternal validity»³, «a recognition of the eternal validity of the personality»⁴. Tolstoy does not recognize this validity because he does not believe in the resurrection of the dead and immortality⁵. «Tolstoy», according to B. Zenkovsky, «does not believe in personal immortality and yet more unacceptable for him is the resurrection and the reestablishment of the individual»⁶ in immortality. But for Kierkegaard this belief is very fundamental. It is a belief that makes him see his life as being identical with death and the life beyond grave as the real and true life. And it is for the sake of this eternal life or immortality that he is urged to submit himself to self-mortification.

The drama of Kierkegaard, therefore, is different from that of Tolstoy, whose «self-crucifixion» is a desperate endeavor to attain the impossible: the searching of the absolute in the temporal. Kierkegaard, in his «self-mortification» endeavors to gain the eternal by

1. B. Zenkovsky, *Histoire de la Philosophie russe*, vol. 1, p. 442.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 434-435.

3. S. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 2, p. 218.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

5. Tolstoy rejects personal immortality. In one of the last entries in his *Journals* (September 4, 1910) Tolstoy writes: «Individual personality is what prevents the merger of my Soul with the Whole, and after death my soul will remain but not my personality» (Leo Tolstoy, *Last Diaries*, edited, with an Introduction, by Leon Stilman, New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1960, p. 173; comp. February 13, 1910, p. 53). In his rejection of personal immortality Tolstoy was influenced by Spinoza and Schopenhauer (M. K. Macrakis, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-125; see also the whole chapter, pp. 113-134).

6. B. Zenkovsky, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 431.

the sacrifice of the temporal¹. And, it is on this point that he relates self-mortification with immortality.

This relation makes Kierkegaard feel joy in the thought that the school of sufferings prepares him for eternity. From this point of view Kierkegaard is similar not to Tolstoy but to Dostoevsky who also relates suffering with eternity. For the latter the eternal is the Absolute, that is, God. In opposition to God, who is the absolute Good, evil in the world is the temporal. For Dostoevsky, according to Paul Evdokimov, «evil is an ideal moment of the nothingness; it is at the same time in the world the power of negation of the Absolute rather than the power of self-negation»² But evil has also a positive value³ when it purifies man by suffering. This means, according to P. Evdokimov again: «to feel that evil purifies is equal to feel the nothingness of evil; man, therefore, turns towards that in which he lives, towards the Absolute»⁴. In this sense, as N. Berdyaev interprets Dostoevsky's thought, «the good that can be derived from evil is attained only by the way of suffering and repudiation of evil. Dostoevsky believed firmly in the redemptive and regenerative power of suffering»⁵.

This meaning of suffering is the main idea of Dostoevsky's last and best novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Bratya Karamazovy)⁶. As Berdyaev says, «it is from the Karamazov world itself that the new man has to be born... resurrection is victorious over death in the soul of Alyosha and he is born again»⁷. So, Alyosha followed «the path of Christ [which] was from Golgotha to the resurrection and victory over death»⁸. The whole book, as Ernest J. Simmons remarks, ends by the

1. Kierkegaard in the second volume of his *Either/Or* quotes again and again Christ's saying: «What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?» (Matt. 16:26). And, as he explains, by «soul» he understands the «self», that is, the «individual» (*Either/Or.*, vol 2, p. 224).

2. Paul Evdokimov, *Dostoïevsky et le problème du mal*, Préface d' Olivier Clément, Paris, Desclée De Brouwer, 1979, p. 402.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 174ff.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

5. N. Berdyaev, *Dostoïevsky*, trans. by Donald Attwater, New York, Meridian Books, 1957, p. 95; see also pp. 92, 109, 203.

6. See Christ's saying in the Gospel according to St. John, 12:24 which Dostoevsky chooses as motto of his book.

7. N. Berdyaev, *op. cit.*, pp. 207-208.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

joyful note of resurrection when in Ilusha's funeral Alyosha informs Kolya and his playmates that the dead shall rise¹.

Alyosha is the most representative among Dostoevsky's heroes. And the path that he followed from Golgotha to the resurrection is the path of Dostoevsky himself who at the end of his life, after so many sufferings², found the joy of resurrection. And, like Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard passed «through suffering to joy», a joy derived from the hope of eternity. Therefore, Kupt F. Reinhard's characterization of Kierkegaard as «a Christian who deeply experienced the agony on Mount Calvary but without its sequel, the joy and gladness of Easter»³ is not true. It is true, of course, in the sense that the emphasis in Kierkegaard's writings is on Calvary because of his «contemporaneusness»: his participation in Christ's Passion by suffering. But this mortification in reality was for him a deliverance from death, a spiritual resurrection with its consequence of eternity, from which Kirkegaard derived his joy and gladness as one can see so obviously in his *Gospel of Sufferings* in which he emphasizes so much the joy which comes through suffering.

1. E. J. Simmons, *Dostoevsky, the Making of a Novelist*, London, Oxford University Press, 1940, p. 362.

2. «No one has felt human suffering more acutely than Dostoevsky, and his heart is over-bleeding» (N. Berdyaev, *op. cit.*, p. 107).

3. K. F. Reinhardt, «A Cleavage of Minds» in *Commonweal*, vol. 24, No. 23, October 3, 1936, p. 524.

CONCLUSION

Death is a subject which does not concern only religion but also what Kierkegaard calls the Aesthetic stage of life. Generally the Danish philosopher, as we said, distinguishes three stages of existence or «Stages on Life's Way»¹, as he himself calls them. These stages are, according to him, «an aesthetic, an ethical, and the religious, yet not abstract like the immediate, the mediate, the unity of the two [to use the language of the speculative philosophy], but concrete in the existential factors: pleasure-perdition; action-victory; suffering»².

These stages, as we can see in the above quotation, been characterized as «existential» are contrasted by Kierkegaard to the «abstraction» of the speculative philosophy or metaphysics which simply *is*. «The metaphysical», he says, «is abstraction, there is no man who exists metaphysically. The metaphysical, ontology, *is* but does not *exist*; for when it exists it is in the aesthetic, in the ethical, in the religious, and when it *is* it is the abstraction of the *prius* for the aesthetic, the ethical, the religious»³.

However, this distinction between «what it is» and «what it becomes», which is a distinction between essence and existence, is also made by Kierkegaard within the spheres of life alone as a distinction between the aesthetic and the ethical. So, in the second volume of *Either/Or* whose subject is the ethical stage, he talks about the difference of this stage from the aesthetic as follows: «The aesthetical in a man»,

1. This is the title of a Kierkegaard's work edited on April 30, 1845 by the pseudonym Hilarius Bookbinder.

2. S. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, Introduction, p. 10. As Frithiof Brandt remarks, «Søren Kierkegaard's principal stages correspond more or less to epicureanism, stoicism, and christianism» (Fr. Brandt, *Søren Kierkegaard, sa vie, ses oeuvres*, trad. par Pierre Martens, Copenhagen, Det Danske Selskab, 1963, p.31).

3. S. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, p. 430. Kierkegaard says the above words, making the contrast of his stages of existence to Hegel's system in which logic and metaphysics created as a unity of thought and reality are both for Kierkegaard abstract thought only, knowledge without reality (See S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, p. 12).

he says, «is that by which he is immediately what he is; the ethical is that where by he becomes what he becomes»¹.

In the same sense we must also understand within the religious stage alone the distinction between A and B which is a distinction between the theoretical and practical aspects of religion and as such therefore is a reflection of the difference between speculative philosophy and existence in general. Referring especially to Christianity as a religion, Kierkegaard says: «Speculative philosophy must not call itself Christian. By me therefore religiousness A has never been called Christian or Christianity»². «The specific thing in Christianity is the dialectical in the second instance»³, that is, «in religiousness B»⁴ which means «to become and to be Christian»⁵.

Considering that «the ethical sphere is only», according to Kierkegaard, «a transitional sphere»⁶ between the aesthetic and the religious, we can understand that the real contrast exists between the first and the third spheres. It is the contrast of the aesthetical in which a man «is immediately what he is»⁷ to the religious, that is, «to what he strives in faith to become»⁸. This contrast, which in reality is the same with that of potentiality to actuality, is analogous to the contrast we have seen between the «abstraction» of the speculative and the «concreteness» of the three stages of existence in general.

Basing ourselves on this contrast, then, we have treated our subject of death, on the one hand, in an «abstract» sense distinguished from death in a «concrete» sense (physical death); and, on the other hand, death in a spiritual sense distinguished from mortification as a means of immortality. In other words, our treatment refers to death in the state of «being» and to death in the state of «becoming».

The first case is that of Tolstoy, who in his attitude towards death remains only in the aesthetic stage of life. He is the man who «is immediately what he is», without ever deciding to make the leap into the state of becoming⁹. For this reason, though he feels death in a concrete

1. S. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 2, p. 182; see also p. 229.

2. S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 498.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 496.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 497.

5. *Ibid.*

6. S. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, p. 430.

7. S. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 2, p. 182.

8. S. Kierkegaard, *Fearing and Trembling*, p. 17.

9. Even in the case that we accept that Tolstoy, after his spiritual crisis

sense, he arrived at despair¹ which is the highest point of the aesthetic stage. In opposition to Tolstoy, Kierkegaard sees death as a «dying to the world», that is, as self-mortification in view of eternity. For this reason, he endeavors «to become a Christian»², participating in Christ's Passion by suffering which is the main characteristic of the religious stage³.

(1880c.), enters the religious stage, he remains again in the state of «being»; for he could never go further than Religiousness A which, as representing the speculative aspect of religion, is opposed to its practical aspect which Religiousness B expresses as a state of «becoming». In Tolstoy his moral and religious doctrine was always in contrast to his own life (About this contrast see M. K. Macrakis, *op. cit.*, pp. 214ff.).

1. Tolstoy was in despair not only during his spiritual crisis, that is, at the time he was writing his *Confession* in which, as he says, this despair led him to the verge of suicide. In reality, he continued to be in despair even after his crisis, from the beginning of his life until his death. A proof of this is his escape from home which is a desperate effort for redemption during the last days of his life (*Ibid.*, pp. 263ff.).

2. Kierkegaard's whole life and his work as an author is an endeavor to be and to remain a true Christian. In one of his works he states that «the whole of [his] work as an author is related to Christianity, to the problem 'of becoming a Christian'» (S. Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for my Work as an Author*, trans., with an Introduction, by Walter Lowrie, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1962, pp. 5-6). For this reason, he is against the theoretical Christianity of Hegel and the compromised Christianity of the Church of his country. In a series of hard-hitting articles written in his last years (1854-1855) and compiled as *Attack upon «Christendom»*, «he uttered», according to J. D. Collins, «his 'midnight cry' against a state church as a contradiction of terms, asking only that it admit that, it was not true Christianity but a comfortable compromise between Christ and social power» (James D. Collins, «Søren Kierkegaard», in *The Encyclopaedia Americana*, Danbury, Connecticut, Americana Corporation, 1979, vol. 16, p. 408).

3. Christianity, according to Kierkegaard, is «truthfully presented as suffering» (*The Journals of Kierkegaard*, p. 209). For this reason, «to be a Christian» is «what Jesus Christ talks about; cross and agony and suffering, crucifying the flesh, suffering for the doctrine, being salt, being sacrificed, etc.» (S. Kierkegaard, *Attack upon «Christendom»*, trans., with an Introduction, by W. Lowrie, Boston, The Beacon Press, 1959, pp. 34-35). The result of this suffering and sacrifice is the joy in view of eternity. It is the joy that Kierkegaard himself felt through his whole life of sufferings. And, when he died, he was filled, according to J. D. Collins, with this joy, the «religious joy» (J. D. Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 408).