

# ON THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN RECOLLECTION AND REMEMBRANCE IN “THE WORK OF LOVE IN RECOLLECTING ONE WHO IS DEAD”

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*Abstract:* In the penultimate chapter of his *Works of Love* (1847) Kierkegaard addresses our duty to recollect the dead. This paper argues that in both the original Danish and the English translation, Kierkegaard’s use of the term “recollection” bears a significantly different meaning from the term “remembrance.” In contrast to remembrance, the act of recollection is an active process of appropriation requiring inwardness on the part of the individual relating themselves to the deceased. Kierkegaard argues that what renders our relationship to the dead unique is the fact that there can be no expectation of reciprocity when we visit the graves of the departed. In these pages, I posit that the use of “recollection” in Kierkegaard’s 1845 discourse “At a Graveside,” supports this interpretation of the same term in *Works of Love*.

*Keywords:* recollection, remembrance, death, reciprocity, love, duty, emotion

Many of us have furrowed our brows over the prominent role recollection (*Erindring*) (as opposed to remembering, *at huske*) occupies in the architecture of Kierkegaard’s thought.<sup>1</sup> Whether it be in the *Philosophical Fragments* or *Repetition*, the concept of recollection performs different functions in different Kierkegaardian texts. In this brief reflection, I aim to distinguish the meaning of recollection from remembrance in a section of *Works of Love*.

In the penultimate chapter of *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard wags a minatory finger reminding us of our duty to *recollect* the dead. Here, “recollection” lacks the epistemological resonances of, say, the *Fragments*, but instead points to a duty, which today seems archaic

<sup>1</sup> See SKS 6, 17 / SLW 9: “to recollect [*erindre*] is by no means the same as to remember [*at huske*].” On the role of recollection in Kierkegaard’s writings, including the difference between recollection and remembering, see Nathaniel Kramer, “Recollection,” in *Kierkegaard’s Concepts*, Tome V, *Objectivity to Sacrifice*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception, and Resources*, vol. 15 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 197–203; and Nathaniel Kramer, “Kierkegaard and Heiberg: Philosophy at the Crossroads of Memory,” in *The Crisis of the Danish Golden Age and Its Modern Resonance*, ed. Jon Stewart and Nathaniel Kramer (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2020), p. 233.

to many Westerners, who prefer to think of death as a time to “celebrate” the deceased, or, in the ubiquitous language of the therapeutic, as an opportunity to find “closure” with the deceased. In contrast, *Works of Love* insists our relationship to the dead is primarily a *duty to recollect* the person we have buried. How might the obligation to recollect differ from the need to simply think of the dead now and again? That is, to simply remember them? In the discourse “At a Graveside,” a piece that could serve as a companion to the chapter of *Works of Love* under scrutiny, Kierkegaard hails a recently deceased old man who, throughout all the changes that time brings to life, remained steadfast in his awareness of his duty to “recollect God.” On the first page of this discourse, the late former shop owner, a Clark Kent-like knight of faith, is described as someone who lived in “honorable obscurity” and who never forgot that “in the grave there is no recollection, not even of God.”<sup>2</sup>

In a spate of pages devoted to the dead in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard emphasizes that there is no greater, no more freely undertaken deed than recollecting the dead, because there is no expectation of reciprocity involved in standing at a graveside or in any other way of relating ourselves to the fallen.<sup>3</sup> The main task of Kierkegaard’s study is to ferret out the difference between true love, i.e., love as a duty, and self-love. In other words, his observations about our relating to the dead have implications for how we relate to the living. Kierkegaard observes, “in the love-relationship between living persons there usually is still the hope and the prospect of repayment, at least the repayment of reciprocal love. . . . But this hope and this prospect . . . make one unable to see with complete clarity what is love and what is self-love.”<sup>4</sup> He elaborates:

When one actual person relates himself to another actual person, the result is two, the relationship is constituted, and the observation of the one person alone is made difficult. In other words, the second person covers over something of the first person; moreover, the second person can have so much influence that the first one appears different from what he is.<sup>5</sup>

It is a truism to say that falling in love produces a form of intoxication in which we overestimate the qualities of our beloved. Kierkegaard considered the issue from a different

<sup>2</sup> SKS 5, 442 / TD, 71.

<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard’s claim that there is no possible expectation of reciprocity in our relation to the dead could be contested by the fact that some people, some of whom I have known, would feel guilty if they did not visit the graves of their dearly departed.

<sup>4</sup> SKS 9, 344 / WL, 351.

<sup>5</sup> SKS 9, 341 / WL, 347.

angle. On his reckoning, falling in love befogs not only the way we see our beloved but also the way we see ourselves. For instance, perhaps, in the midst of a contentious relationship my beloved accuses me of being a callous individual marred by an empathy deficit. Given the enchanting powers of love I might mistakenly internalize this accusation and see myself in the distorted mirror of my beloved's depiction. Yet, there is no danger of this kind of confusion in our relation to the dead.

Kierkegaard argues that the measure of a relationship can be calibrated by how the living person relates to the dead. Here there are none of the complications inherent in the connection between two individuals still drawing breath. Kierkegaard states, "one who is dead is no actuality; no one, no one can make himself *no one* as well as one who is dead, because he is *no one*."<sup>6</sup> Those who we euphemistically say have "passed on" cannot send us a thank you card for the bouquet left at their grave, nor can they scold us if we plan on visiting the cemetery on Sunday, but get sidetracked and never make it there. Since, on Kierkegaard's reckoning, there is no possibility of give-and-take involved in our connection to the dead, there is no aperture for a love tinged by self-love; hence, his conclusion, "if you want to ascertain what love there is in you or another person, then pay attention to how he relates himself to one who is dead."<sup>7</sup>

Two other Galileos of the psyche bear witness to Kierkegaard's summation. In a personal communication, the Dostoyevsky scholar Maxwell Parlin points out that in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, forgetfulness and indifference to the dead are tools the immortal Russian author applies to signal the shallow and debauched nature of the elder Karamazov. Early in the novel, Karamazov's son, Alyosha, beseeches his father to reveal the location of Alyosha's mother's grave. The besotted old scamp can't even recall where his second wife, is buried!<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Tolstoy registers indifference to the dead as a symptom of the superficiality and inhumanity of bourgeois society. At Ilyich's funeral, Ilyich's ostensibly close friends are so consumed with entertaining themselves and calculating the impact of Ilyich's death on their careers that they seem to have forgotten their mate even before he has been laid in his six-foot house.<sup>9</sup> Since they are "nothing actual," the dead serve as a veritable projective test for what is in our hearts,

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> See Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), pp. 88–89.

sometimes hovering as a sad reminder of an ungrateful absence of connection to those who are no more, but who once played a prominent role in our lives.

Any study of love ignoring the affective component misses the bull's-eye. *Works of Love* describes love as containing seemingly immiscible elements. First and foremost it is defined as a duty, but also as a need and a passion. Unfortunately, the feeling element, the tenderness, is hidden in the weeds but it crops up in the chapter on recollecting the dead. Consider Kierkegaard's instructions:

We ought not to disturb the dead by wailing and crying. We ought to treat one who is dead as we treat one who is sleeping, whom we do not have the heart to awaken because we hope that he will wake up by himself. "Weep, very softly over one who is dead, for he has attained rest," says Sirach (22:11); and I know of no better way to describe true recollection than by this soft weeping that does not burst into sobs at one moment—and soon subsides. No, we are to recollect the dead, weep softly, but weep long.<sup>10</sup>

Behind our waterworks is the tenderness essential to authentic recollection. In a famous passage from his *Journals*, the twenty-two-year-old Kierkegaard pulls back the curtain on his emotional life. On a summer sojourn he gazes out at the sea, later to recall:

Often, as I stood here on a quiet evening, the sea intoning its song with deep but calm solemnity, my eye catching not a single sail on the vast surface, and only the sea framed the sky and the sky the sea . . . the busy hum of life grew silent and the birds sang their vespers, then *the few dear departed ones rose from the grave before me, or rather, it seemed as though they were not dead. I felt so much at ease in their midst, I rested in their embrace, and I felt as though I were outside my body and floated about with them in a higher ether*—until the seagull's harsh screech reminded me that I stood alone and it all vanished before my eyes, and with a heavy heart I turned back to mingle with the world's throng—yet without forgetting such blessed moments.<sup>11</sup>

The expression "resting in their embrace" is reminiscent of the active-passivity inherent in the formula defining the cure for despair in *The Sickness Unto Death* "as resting transparently in the power that established it."<sup>12</sup> Recollection is a more active inward process than remembering. The Danish verb "to recollect" (*erindre*) is rooted in the German *erinnern*, and it is derived from the German *innern*, which means "to make familiar with." Etymologically speaking, *erindre* is related to the adjective *indre* ("inner" in English) and

<sup>10</sup> SKS 9, 341–342 / WL, 348.

<sup>11</sup> SKS 17, 13–14, AA:6 / KJN 1, 9 (emphasis added). My thanks to Anna L. Söderquist for reminding me of this unforgettable passage.

<sup>12</sup> SKS 11, 130 / SUD, 14.

as such relates to the German expression *inne haben* (“to know” or “to understand”) and *inne werden* (“to become aware of” or “to notice”).<sup>13</sup> The underscoring of inwardness is absent in the Danish verb “to remember” (*huske*).

As the years passed, I wonder if Kierkegaard’s ideas about the dead were influenced by a need to remind himself of his oft-stated eternal devotion to Regine. After all, no less than the rest of us, Kierkegaard was all-too-human: he made a failed attempt at a rapprochement with Regine.<sup>14</sup> In 1855, she sailed off to the Danish West Indies where her husband, Johan Frederik Schlegel, had been appointed governor.<sup>15</sup> It is pure speculation, but perhaps Kierkegaard needed to pinch himself to keep the wound open and recollect his former fiancée, around whom, along with his deceased father, his life seemed to orbit.

For many of us, memories of the dead are triggered and float to consciousness as a random series of pictures we might smile upon, chuckle over, or maybe just shake our heads at. Then, as though a wave toppled over them, the images fade, without us necessarily actively engaging with them. For example, I recently enjoyed a stroll on the beach. As the waves licked at my feet, an image of my long-deceased father surfcasting swam to the surface of consciousness. For a fleeting moment it struck me that this memory captured one of a few instances in which my dad seemed relaxed and at peace. Then, the image was drowned out by the buzz and busyness of daily life. I did not shed a tear or reconsider the narrative I used to psychologically package my dad. The memory was a delightful morsel, but lacked the active element *Works of Love* links to recollection.

Even in the title of his book, Kierkegaard reminds us that recollecting the dead is a work and as such is not a passive process but an activity. As Kierkegaard phrases it, “if we are to love the persons we see, then also those we have seen but see no more.”<sup>16</sup> More than once, the author pokes the reader and himself: “The untrustworthiness of human feelings left to their own devices perhaps never manifests itself more than in this very relationship.”<sup>17</sup> In the immediacy of a painful loss we may promise to hold the dearly departed forever, but in a few days or weeks the Lethe of forgetfulness overflows the banks of our resolve. When the coffin is shut, Kierkegaard prescribes that we refrain from

<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to Troy Wellington Smith for his guidance on the etymological distinction between these two terms.

<sup>14</sup> See Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 598–602.

<sup>15</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 746.

<sup>16</sup> SKS 9, 341 / WL, 347.

<sup>17</sup> SKS 9, 342 / WL, 348.

the forever vow. In biting terms, he writes: “When you say to one who is dead, ‘You I will never forget,’ it is as if he [the departed] answered, ‘Fine! Rest assured that I will never forget that you said it.’”<sup>18</sup> Those of us who understand our relationships in non-transactional terms and as something more than ships passing in the night occasionally need to tap ourselves on the shoulder, lest our propensity for forgetfulness and immersion in the adventures of daily life make us as cold to the lost loved one as they have grown cold in the grave. Kierkegaard frequently admonishes himself and his readers that nothing can hold back the tsunami of the passage of time; like a watercolor painting, our emotions are bound to grow fainter over the years. According to *Works of Love*, it is our duty to struggle against this change and actively reawaken the memory and feelings for the departed, who would otherwise undergo a second death as they vanish from our inner landscape.

Ultimately, the duty to recollect the dead, as opposed to just remembering them, is an advanced lesson in fulfilling the duty to love the living. The lesson being that with true love, in contrast to self-love, there is no demand for reciprocity. Once again, this lack of expectation is precisely what distinguishes our loving recollection of the dead. After all, if there were an expectation of a reward, love would not be considered a duty or a work. As noted above, Kierkegaard stressed the untrustworthiness of the human heart, the ebb and flow of feelings and the power of those feelings to frame our world. A few years ago I was “ghosted” by a longtime friend whom I considered a brother. Up until then I had not experienced a hint of friction. Nevertheless, after a year or so of making overtures, I enclosed some photos in a warm farewell note, and that was it. I was intent on moving on and emotionally letting go of my bosom pal. No one writes more insightfully than Kierkegaard about our proclivity for pulling the wool over our own eyes. Even in *Works of Love*, he underscores, “people love to deceive themselves in all kinds of delusions more than they love both the living and the dead.”<sup>19</sup> À la Kierkegaard’s warning, I dug deeply trying to discern if I might have offended my friend in a way I failed to recognize. Still I could not fathom the cause of the break. Not that Kierkegaard was himself successful in this, but the duty remains to love our neighbors even if they no longer feel like spiritual near-dwellers. Central to that duty is the note ringing throughout *Works of Love* that, regardless of our scars, the duty to love demands presupposing the love of others,

<sup>18</sup> SKS 9, 350 / WL, 356.

<sup>19</sup> SKS 9, 349 / WL, 355.

presupposing the love implanted by God *in* everyone, including those who have left us behind and with whom we have no grounds for expecting anything in return.