

The Meaning of Death

“He hit and hit again and again. He drew blood. Then the man ceased to cry out, ceased to struggle. He lay still. And the younger man kept on hitting, so that the moment of the older man’s death was lost in a frenzy of blows. Then finally there was silence” (Griffin 377).

The morning of Wednesday, October 5th, Apple founder Steve Jobs died at home at the age of 56. He was—and still is—widely mourned. The word “visionary” is used in virtually every article recalling his professional life and magnificent list of achievements. Millions adore his company’s products and once waited eagerly for each new announcement, every speech he would give. But I was unmoved.

The same morning, while I was walking to class, I saw a dead pigeon in the road. It was mostly intact, except for a coagulated gelatinous redness where its skin had split open in the joint between its head and body. While I’m no member of the Audubon Society, I’m fond of birds; they’re hilarious. The following day, when I walked past the spot where it had died, nothing remained but a fuzzy pink stain.

I find the dead bird infinitely sadder than the well-announced passing of Steve Jobs. What makes his death mean less to me than that of a flying rat?

Really, what the hell is wrong with me? Why can’t I just relate to the death of a major figure—albeit one to whom I have little connection—with sympathy rather than cold rationality?¹

“Anaxagoras is praised as the man who first declared that Nous, [T]hought, is the principle of the world, that the essence of the world is to be defined as thought. In so doing he laid the

foundation for an intellectual view of the universe, the pure form of which must be logic” (Hegel S54).

The night of October 5th, I had an argument with my girlfriend, Emily. Holding to some absurd standard of intellectual honesty, I laid out, perhaps a bit *too* emphatically, my position. Steve Jobs wasn’t the beatified icon presented immediately following his death². Jobs was an excellent businessman, but he wasn’t the engineer of all of his products. He was not as great as his “visionary” image. I felt that I was providing a rational counterbalance to the post-terminal hype.

Emily strongly disagreed with me, “You have the rest of your life to pick apart all of the shitty things Steve Jobs did. Let him rest.” While she is part of the coterie of loyal Apple users, I was still surprised by the vehemence of her response, as I’m sure she was surprised by the coldness of mine. In retrospect, I cannot blame her for her reaction.

“[O]ne evening, as I returned home, I saw a strange man standing near my door. He had come to tell me my father was dead, struck by an automobile while he was crossing the street in the light of dusk” (Griffin 380).

“Some people die and leave behind no legacies,” Emily said to me. Five years ago on October 5th, Emily’s father died of cancer. The same affliction killed Steve Jobs on the same day. I was concerned with intellectual inquiry and integrity when I should have been paying attention to the reality of the situation. The problem was not just my desire to deconstruct the latest sacred cow; death was the problem. It was exacerbated by the death two weeks earlier of a childhood friend of Emily’s by drug overdose. She hadn’t spoken with him in years. “All of

these people who influenced our lives just disappear. And I don't know what to do when people disappear.”

“*He went to stand by the body of the old man. Blood poured profusely from the wounds on his head. He stared into the face of this dead man. And now in his telling of the story he was crying. He paused. What was it there in that face for him, broken, afraid, shattered, flesh and bone past repair, past any effort, any strength?* I could see, *he told me*, that this man was just like me” (Griffin 377).

Where do the individuals who vanish from our lives go? In a sense, as with the disappearance of the Jews in Nazi Germany, they are already dead. Their absence in our lives represents a void, a negative space, that demands to be filled.

Susan Griffin's essay “Our Secret” is dominated by themes of death and violence, which makes sense given its intense (and often puzzling) identification with Nazi *Reichsführer* Heinrich Himmler. She reiterates Alice Miller's question: “[w]hat could make a person conceive the plan of gassing millions of human beings to death?”, (340) but is her search for the answer so intense as to lead Griffin to think the unthinkable³ and try to understand Himmler, one of recent history's greatest perpetrators, as a victim?

Sympathy for Himmler seems impossible when she describes the following scene, where *Reichsführer* Himmler visits the Russian front and views, with inferred horror, the ruthless efficiency of his *Einsatzgruppen*:

The captured men, women, and children are ordered to remove their clothing then.

Naked, they stand before the pit they have dug. Some scream. Some attempt escape.

The young men in uniform place their rifles against their shoulders and fire into the

naked bodies. They do not fall silently. There are cries. There are open wounds. There are faces blown apart. Stomachs opened up. The dying groan. Weep. Flutter. Open their mouths. (Griffin 363)

Reacting to this event with a grotesque parody of humanity, Heinrich Himmler conceived and justified his portion of the Nazis' *Final Solution* in order to shield his *Einsatzgruppen*—and himself by extension—from the reality of the systematic genocide of the Jews. This observation, that “[s]haken by what he has seen and heard, Himmler returns to Berlin resolved to ease the pain of these [*Einsatzgruppen* soldiers],” (340) combines with Griffin’s earlier statement, “[o]f course there cannot be one answer to such a monumental riddle, nor does any event in history have a single cause. Rather a field exists, like a field of gravity that is created by the movements of many bodies. Each life is influenced and it in turn becomes an influence. Whatever is a cause is also an effect” (364) to answer Alice Miller’s question.

The indirect path Griffin takes to illustrate her *determining field* shows that real, serious, ultimate Truth is not a direct statement. No dogma or credo can encapsulate it.⁴ Truth is an interstitial entity, lurking in the cracks between existence and essence, between the idea and the reality. The final solution to the riddle lies somewhere between Himmler the child-victim, tortured for his own good by the strictures of early nineteenth century German pedagogy, and Himmler *Reichsführer*, institutionalizing mass-murder because it seems more humane⁵. This is the great understanding of Susan Griffin’s “Our Secret”: that Truth is not an answer but a question. Meaning arises out of the process of inquiry; the search for meaning *is* the meaning.

“[W]e call dialectic the higher movement of reason in which such seemingly utterly separate terms pass over into each other spontaneously, through that which they are, a movement in

which the presupposition sublates itself. It is the dialectical immanent nature of being and nothing themselves to manifest their unity, that is, becoming, as their truth.” (Hegel S175)

Georg Friedrich Hegel viewed the world as a rational entity. He thought that the ultimate nature of reality was knowable through logic: “[O]bjective thinking then, is the content of pure science. Consequently, far from it being formal, far from it standing in need of a matter to constitute an actual and true cognition, it is its content alone which has absolute truth[...]but a matter which is not external to the form, since this matter is rather pure thought and hence the absolute form itself” (S53).

Here, he is referring to Platonic philosophy, where the ideal form is the ultimate reality, the truest possible manifestation of a concept. In Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates asks his student, Glaucon, to imagine a group of prisoners who have been bound from early childhood so that the only thing they can see is the shadows cast on the wall of their cave by puppets moved in front of a fire roaring behind them (Book VII). He posits that because they knew nothing else, to them “the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images” (Book VII). In this light, he is saying that humans are the like his allegorical prisoners; it is only after being freed from the shackles of ignorance that man⁶ can exit the cave and see the true forms that he had previously known only as shadows⁷.

Hegel’s dialectic comes out of the Plato’s writing, which is structured as a discourse between teacher and pupil. However, where Plato uses dialectic as a discussion between a teacher (often Socrates) who instructs by answering the student’s straw man arguments with his learned wisdom, Hegel views this process as much more useful tool in and of itself for the discovery of ultimate truth. His dialectic is the confrontation between two opposing ideas. The

thesis clashes with its *antithesis*, which is not the negation or inverse of the *thesis* but rather its opponent. The conflict between thesis and antithesis resolves into a *synthesis* of the two ideas, wherein the two combine to generate a new concept, one that approaches the ideal form.

“It is in this dialectic as it is here understood, that is, in the grasping of opposites in their unity or of the positive in the negative, that speculative thought consists” (Hegel S69).

When viewed as a process, as the collision of conflicting ideas, Griffin’s essay makes much more sense as a whole. She implies meaning and purpose rather than overtly stating them. Her essay seems to be as much a question of identity as it is an answer. The collage of images presented mirrors the flow of forms sensed in life. We do not perceive the world as a continuous narrative; it is only after the fact that we can impose a sequence in order to make sense of events.

Susan Griffin takes the story of Heinrich Himmler’s life and alters its sequential presentation, thereby reexamining his customary representation. In pursuit of understanding, she seems to start with empathy for the boy who was a victim, as were much of early 20th century Germany, of the pedagogical techniques of Dr. Daniel Schreber. Himmler’s life story, the transformation from victim into villain, does not offer Griffin a clear point of metamorphosis; he does not suddenly wake up a cockroach.

Similarly, I have presented the sequence of events in my life in order to bolster and parallel my search for understanding. While Emily and I were arguing, I did not fit a narrative to the dispute. I continued to speak against the dead Mr. Jobs out of obliviousness rather than any malicious impulse, not realizing that she was growing increasingly upset. Neither of us was right or wrong⁸. The underlying truth in the situation came out of our disagreement. The conflict between our antithetical views of Steve Jobs—situated in the spectrum between technological

messiah and latter-day computational charlatan—was more about ourselves than the man.

Through our argument, I came to a better understanding of both her and, obliquely, of Griffin's writing.

“What we are dealing with in logic is not a thinking about something which exists independently as a base for our thinking and apart from it, nor forms which are supposed to provide mere signs or distinguishing marks of truth; on the contrary, the necessary forms and self-consciousness of thought are the content and the ultimate truth itself” (Hegel S54).

Hegel's idea of the dialectic is that it not only comprises our understanding of reality; it is reality. In this respect, I would argue that Susan Griffin is approaching reality. As she confronts seemingly irreconcilable ideas—like the similarities between her life and that of Nazi monster Heinrich Himmler—the only solution is to smash them into each other, to break through the conflict into the answer. Emily and I argued about Steve Jobs' death, but the reason behind our argument was not only that death; it was the lamented disappearance of loved ones and friends, their forms fading into shadows cast in flickering firelight.

Death ties every living thing together. If nothing else, it is the one thing that we all share. It runs through the disparate threads of *Our Secret* as well. It is easy to point out now, in light of the charnel houses at Auschwitz and Dachau, to name the best-known of concentration camps, that funereal imagery dominates our perception of Nazi Germany. The death's head⁹ was used in a number of SS divisions as a special marker. Fascism, in all its myriad manifestations, is marked by an idealization of a distant past¹⁰, but those idols were an imagined myth of an ideal past that never existed. It was almost as if their dead gods demanded human sacrifice to become real.

Heinrich Himmler had death trucks and Zyklon B showers developed to spare his *Einsatzgruppen* the horror of their ultimate task, and he died by self-inflicted poison. Leo murdered the defenseless old man. The gay lover was beaten and thrown into the river to drown. Death and violence seem to permeate every last bit of existence, to the point where it is unbearable.

When I think of that young man now, who died in the river near the island of my father's birth, died because he loved another man, I like to imagine his body bathed in the pleasure of that love. To believe that the hands that touched this young man's thighs, his buttocks, his penis, the mouth that felt its way over his body, the man who lay himself between his legs, or over, around his body did this lovingly, and that then the young man felt inside his flesh what radiated from his childlike beauty. Part angel. Bathed in a passionate sweetness. Tasting life at its youngest, most original center, the place of reason, where one is whole again as at birth. (Griffin 381)

In the dialectical model, the two ideas confronting each other are not necessarily the obvious opposites one would expect. The opposite of death is not necessarily life, because death is not the absence of life. Death is the end of life. Therefore, the opposite of death, or at least the one presented above, is love. I thought the above passage was gratuitous when I first read it, but it serves as a powerful counter to all of the death and violence preceding it. Sex is not (necessarily) obscene. Murder and violence are always obscene. The hippies were right: love is the answer.

Except truth is not that simple. Continuing with the dialectical mode, love is not the result, it is the idea confronting violence: the antithesis of death. The answer, the synthesis of the

two ideas, comes therefore from the conflict between love and death. The result is life in all its messy, multithreaded complexity, scrabbling for answers and returning with more and more questions.

¹ Please, don't call the psychologists. I swear this is working toward some sort of point that doesn't end like *The Silence of the Lambs*.

² In all likelihood I read and internalized too much Orson Scott Card as a teenager. Especially the core idea of *Speaker for the Dead*, which is to speak the Truth, capital "T", about the deceased, regardless of whether they were portrayed positively or negatively.

³ "Thinking the unthinkable" was the RAND Corporation's unofficial motto in the 1960s and 70s.

⁴ I am aware of the irony here of dogmatically stating that dogma cannot define the truth.

⁵ For whom was it more humane, though? If, as F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function," then Himmler possessed a peerless intellect.

⁶ Early philosophy, much like Nazi Germany, and most of human civilization, for that matter, is fairly sexist.

⁷ Take the red pill, ~~Socrates~~ Neo.

⁸ Okay, I was wrong. Especially if Emily asks.

⁹ The death's head is perhaps more recognizable as the skull and crossbones on pirate flags in the popular imagination.

¹⁰ For clarity's sake, I would like to state that I do not mean to imply anything untoward about how some Republican Party members seem to idealize the Eisenhower administration as emblematic of an American golden age.

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