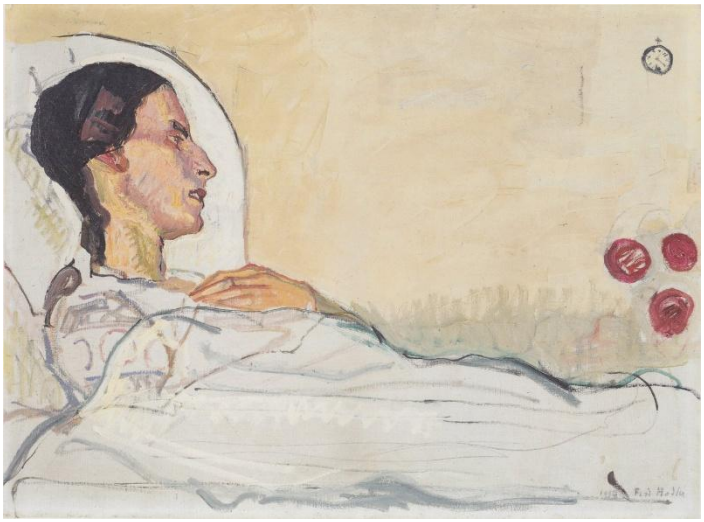
"The Sleep Unto Death"
Steven DeLay
INPR 2026

Hypnos et Thanatos: Le Sommeil et la Mort Sont Frères
Musée Marmottan Monet, December 2025

"In Greek mythology, Night (*Nyx*) gives rise to both *Hypnos* (sleep) and *Thanatos* (death). The myth was probably inspired by atonia, the loss of muscular tonus during sleep and the external resemblance of the two states. *Hypnos* is represented as a winged youth, sometimes asleep, sometimes holding a horn filled with Lethean water or poppy elixir, which was used as a sleep-inducing drug for millennia. In the 19th century, portraits and photographs of corpses on their death bed, apparently asleep, adorned for posterity, are a reminder of the proximity of eternal rest to daily sleep. Artists like Monet, and later Hodler, even painted their wives or mistresses on their death beds."



Valentine Godé-Darel in Sickbed, 1914, by Ferdinand Hodler

Camille sur son lit de mort**,** 1879, by Claude Monet

"This painting is part of a series depicting the slow death throes of Valentine Godé-Darel, Hodler's model and mistress, who was diagnosed with cancer in 1913. The painter documented the evolution of Valentine's disease, torn between the desire to immortalize the memory of his beloved and a macabre impulse to capture death directly. The clock in the top right symbolizes passing time, and the flowers sketched in red circles echo the color of the model's lips. She took her last breath on 26 January 1915."

The Sleep Unto Death

Steven DeLay

Abstract

The phenomenon of sleep is central to the Bible's account of both our being-in-the-world and our being-before-God. After surveying the body of Scriptural witness attesting to this fact, the essay turns to the matter of sleep's connection to the promise of eternal life. To do so, the essay first examines Martin Hägglund and Iain Thomson's Heideggerian arguments against the desirability, or even very possibility, of immortality or eternal life. Having answered those arguments, the essay then presents a phenomenology of night prayer, with an eye to explicating the ways in which various kinds of sleep all in their own way attest to our presence before God, and with it, the felt promise of eternal life. The essay then concludes by affirming how the promise of eternal life, and so the resurrection of the body, can be seen to be disclosed in the figure of the sleeping body.

In the time that leads to death, no recurring duration of our sojourn through the world more manifestly prefigures the inevitable end to come of these days under the sun than does sleep. In sleep, to begin with, we leave the world. For a time, at least. And when we awake, we find ourselves restored to a world we had departed, having thereby undergone a banal, yet nevertheless remarkable, resurrection of sorts, one as miraculous as it is mundane. Indeed, each day, by entering into a night's sleep, and then emerging from it into another day's light, we complete a micro-eschatology.[1] That we sleep, then, not only portends our eventual death. It at the same time foreshadows life after death, life as it will be without any remaining shadow of death, for on the Last Day, there will no longer be death for all those who have at last inherited eternal life in Jesus Christ.

To shed some light on what it is to live presently in light of this promise of eternal life, something should thus be said of sleep. For if eternity is manifest anywhere amid the pattern of our passing days in the world, its claim is perhaps felt most unambiguously, above all, in sleep's interruption and disruption of that worldly horizon, in a call that opens a passage, not to death, but a path to another end, the absolute future of eternal life, the transit of which can only be accomplished by responding to its promise, and so refusing to accord death, rather than life, the last word on life itself. In a word, insofar as we are all sleepers here and now, we are called to vigilance, to awaken to the promise of eternal life.

Hence, from beginning to end, the Holy Scriptures repeatedly speak of our essential being-before-God in light of man's being a sleeper. We first encounter sleep's significance in Genesis's account of Eve's creation in Eden. Quite literally, she emerges from the creative state of sleep: "And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now

[1] We owe the insightful expression "micro-eschatology" to Richard Kearney. See Kearney, *After God*, 3-20. Lacoste has since popularized the term. I trust that both will recognize what else in this paper is borrowed from them also.

bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Gen 2:21-23).

Sleep, however, is not always or solely associated with life. On the contrary, it is consistently employed as another term for death. Thus, in the Psalms, for instance, David will lamentedly beseech of God, "Consider and hear me, O Lord my God: lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death" (Ps 13:3); and lest anyone should think to question or to understate the significance of the recurring equivalence between sleep and death, it should be noted that it is not a usage restricted only to the Old Testament, for, as we read in Acts chapter seven concerning Stephen's martyrdom, his testimony, which ends in death, is thereby said to have ended with sleep: "And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:59-60).

Elsewhere in the Psalms, sleep again is referenced, this time as an illustration of faith, for sleep itself is the reward for the one who has secured God's favor, and hence his protection, and so in turn can rest peacefully: "I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, Lord, only makest me dwell in safety" (Ps 4:8). In an earlier Psalm, sleep is situated in terms of God's faithfulness, for God is said to be the one to whom we can fully entrust ourselves, as borne witness by the fact that he sustains us even to the point of being the one to wake us from our sleep: "I laid me down and slept; I awaked; for the Lord sustained me" (Ps 3:5). And the Proverbs, too, speak of the nature of sleep's being a matter of one's standing with God: "When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet" (Prov 3:24).

More importantly, that all these verses prefigure the promise of the Resurrection cannot go unnoticed when we read the New Testament passages that make plain the spiritual significance of sleep. Thus, we are told, for instance, that Christ himself awakens from a peaceful sleep to calm the storm and to rebuke the worried disciples for their lack of faith (Mark 4:40); sleep's spiritual dimension, its being a figure for faith, or rather its absence, is mentioned once again when, in Gethsemane, the same disciples fall asleep rather than keeping watch in prayer (Matt 26:40-41). Furthermore, when Christ manifests his power over death by raising the daughter of Jairus, he does so by severing the strict equivalence between death and sleep noted previously: "Weep not; she is not dead, but sleepeth" (Mark 5:38). This first miracle's demonstration that the sleep of death is tantamount only to sleep for the one who has the power to raise up those from the dead is further underscored by a second, the raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11:43). And after Christ's own Resurrection, we are told in Matthew's Gospel that the overcoming of death, that is to say, that death only is sleep, is not a reality limited merely to some, but one now available to all: "And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many" (Matt 27:52-53).

Paul, for his part, also turns his attention to sleep when proclaiming the promise of eternal life. Everything hinges on a rebirth to be equated to an awakening from sleep in this life: "now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed" (Rom 13:11). Just, then, as the same apostle says in his first letter to the Corinthians, "Awake to righteousness" (1 Cor 15:34), so too he says in his letter to the Ephesians, "Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light" (Eph 5:14). In the

first letter to the Thessalonians, a similar discourse on sleep features centrally: “Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation” (1 Thess 5:1-8). And in the first letter to the Corinthians just mentioned, the mystery of the Resurrection is presented in figures of sleep meant to illuminate it: the risen Christ “was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep" (1 Cor 15:6); “Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished" (1 Cor 15:18); “But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed" (1 Cor 15:20).

As this lengthy (yet by no means exhaustive) examination reveals, from beginning to end, our condition is not only likened to, but very often directly equated with, the phenomenon of sleep. Scripture presents us as those whose eternal destiny will be determined by our response to the very fact that we are sleepers, and thus those who are called to awaken to eternal life in Christ.

If we meditate on what these passages (and the experiential facts to which they refer) give to understand, we recognize that we have the beginning of an answer to a question that is sure to arise any time the phenomenon of sleep is raised: Why do we sleep? We sleep, in part, of course, because we are beings who physically require rest. We are made in the image of God, and so, just as God provided himself a sabbatical from his work on the seventh day of creation, so we too need to take a break. Sleep restores us.

This theological understanding of sleep’s necessity and purposiveness must not be discounted, but taken seriously. For unlike the commonplace attitude today that would superficially attempt to account for the fact that we must sleep in strictly biological or physiological terms, one purpose of sleep, it must be noted, is to interrupt everydayness, to distance us from the hustle and bustle of the day, and to offer a time of tranquility, or at least solitude and isolation, in which we are alone, or can choose to be alone. In these night hours culminating in sleep itself, we can take inventory of the day that has concluded. Such a time, if nothing else, can be a time for self-examination. Moreover, our sleep can, and indeed should, be an occasion for humility. Not merely because we have all been heard snoring or seen drooling by others. At issue is more than the mere social embarrassment that can attend surrendering our sleeping body to anyone who may see us. Rather, at stake is a creaturely humility: a recognition that even if we choose to conduct ourselves during the day as if we are autonomous, the night reminds us that we are ultimately weak and vulnerable, to such an extent, in fact, that even our own bodies eventually will betray us, as anyone who has struggled and failed to hold his eyes open while drifting off while reading a book or watching a movie knows.

We encounter, here again, the interlacement of sleep and death, all the more so when it is recognized that there is an additional, deeper reason for such humility. In sleep, the world goes on without us. That the world persists in our absence amid our sleep may seem to be a trivial observation hardly worth noting. But if we are thoughtful enough to admit the essential

indifference of the world to our daily abscondment from it in sleep, it does not take much to draw the further, more unsettling, implication: just as the world will go on amid our own sleep, so too it will go on when we fall asleep for our final time, and are dead. That sleep loosens our attachment to the world by reminding us of the world's fundamental indifference to our presence in it should suffice for us to at least pause and consider whether, as Heidegger and so many others have maintained, we really are indeed fundamentally beings-in-the-world.

Contrary, however, to this suggestion that our tenuous and fleeting foothold on the world manifest by sleep ought to occasion the acknowledgment that our fundamental destiny might perhaps lie beyond it, there of course is the possibility of drawing the very opposite conclusion: because our life is finite, and we only have so many days under the sun, we ought to embrace this life, *and this life alone*, by leading it in passionate recognition of its ultimate impermanence and inevitable dissolution.

Such is the main claim Martin Hägglund advances in his aptly titled *This Life: Secular Life and Spiritual Freedom*. Yet the designation "this life," as Hägglund intends it, is contestable. To begin with, by what right will it be denied that the one who chooses to live consciously before-God is the one who thereby embraces the full depths and riches of this life more so than anyone, for he alone faces up to the full seriousness of this life's existence? In any case, it is mistaken to say that "this life" does not involve a call from beyond it, for the promise of eternal life is issued to the one who affirmatively responds to it here and now. And if one responds to this observation by in turn characterizing such a call as merely purported—that is to say, as illusory, unsubstantiated, or indeterminate, it still has been recognized, if only in the form of a refusal. Hägglund, or those in agreement with him, no doubt would in turn contend that it is a misleading overstatement to characterize a life that is led wholly in light of this life alone, and nothing beyond it, as anything more than an indifference to God's claim. Refusal, it will be said, is too strongly put. But even granting that such a response really is indeed mere indifference, and not at bottom motivated by something else, whatever it may be, it is nonetheless an attitude, and hence a response, to eternity's claim. And as Heidegger noted in another context, indifference remains an attunement, and so a way of relating to whatever is at issue for it, or purportedly even *not* at issue for it.

The time has come to address the atheist's belief that death possesses the final word on life. Whereas Proust ruminated on the phenomenon of sleep in an attempt to look back on life nostalgically, rather than reengaging with it actively, Hägglund's conviction regarding the sleep of death's finality is meant to motivate an embrace of this life with the zeal it deserves. In the introduction to his work, he says, "The depths of life are not revealed through faith in eternity. Rather, our spiritual commitments proceed from caring for what will be irrevocably lost and remaining faithful to what gives no final guarantee."[2] Not only does he present his account of "this life" as consisting of meaning-defining commitments resting on the inherent transience and precariousness of a finitude grounded in the finality of death, he couches his theses about finite care and meaning in the strongest modal claims imaginable: "can" and "cannot," "possible" and "impossible," "necessary" and "absolute," and so forth. "Far from making my life meaningful," Hägglund argues, "eternity would make it meaningless, since my actions would have no purpose. What I do and what I love can matter to me only because I understand myself

[2] Hägglund, *This Life*, 36.

as mortal."[3] He continues, "There cannot be any meaningful activities in eternity, since nothing can live on in a timeless presence and nothing can matter in an everlasting existence."[4]

His argument concerning meaning's source in a finite care is metaphysical, not merely psychological. It aims to identify the essential and necessary conditions without which such meaning would be impossible. And, for Hägglund, the nature of the meaning characterizing our worldly practical identities is only possible because of our lifetime's finite duration. Things matter, in this life, as they do, because we only have so much time under the sun. That probably is right. More provocative, however, is another of Hägglund's claims not altogether unrelated to this, namely the contention that not only is there no evidence for immortality, but that immortality would be undesirable, and, in any case, that it is impossible. As he confesses, "I do not want my life to be eternal. An eternal life is not only unattainable but also undesirable, since it would eliminate the care and passion that animate my life."[5]

These observations concerning finite meaning all turn on a recognizably Epicurean appraisal of death—that it is the "absolute loss" of life, the entire "loss of standpoint," in short, oblivion, annihilation, nothingness. For finite beings such as ourselves, there is no beyond, just this world, just this life, a claim Hägglund takes to be thoroughly Heideggerian. "This is your life. There is nothing else,"[6] as he at one point asserts bluntly.

This same claim is one that the Heideggerian Iain Thomson, for his part, defends in *Rethinking Death in and after Heidegger*. Thomson, following Hägglund, argues against the viability and desirability of immortality. According to Thomson, death, or to be more precise, "demise," as Heidegger understands it, *appears* to be the end. We do not experience our own demise (although we can experience our own "death," in the Heideggerian sense), for demise is itself the cessation of all experience. Such a claim raises an inevitable question, and we should not be embarrassed to ask it, even if it may seem too obvious to ask. How does Thomson, or Hägglund, or anyone, for that matter, know that death is the end of experience? Much to his credit, Thomson does in more than one place acknowledge that, strictly speaking, one cannot know, or at least, know for certain. Thomson in turn contrasts his own methodological agnosticism with Hägglund's strident atheism. In a dense footnote, Thomson writes,

> "One might similarly misinterpret Heidegger's famous description of death as 'the possibility of Dasein's impossibility' to mean something like facing up to the very possibility of this atheistic *nevermore*—as if existential death were merely Dasein's confrontation with the possibility that demise might not be followed by an afterlife—a thought that admittedly might indeed catalyze the genuine existential death of a certain kind of unquestioned religious belief (as well as its possible rebirth as *faith*, or its lack). (This seems, for example, to be the way Martin Hägglund misunderstands Heidegger on death.) But in fact the question of a possible afterlife is something about which Heidegger remains deliberately *neutral* or *agnostic*, since phenomenology must confine itself to what it can experience (here, on this side of the mortal veil.)[7]

---

[3] Hägglund, *This Life*, 5.
[4] Hägglund, *This Life*, 29.
[5] Hägglund, *This Life*, 4.
[6] Hägglund, *This Life*, 93.
[7] Thomson, *Rethinking Death in and after Heidegger*, 59n90.

Sartre once said of death in an interview: "For me, it's simple: death is nothingness, hence not part of life, so I do not think of death.'"[8] Whereas for someone like Sartre (if we choose to believe him) death is something that can be entirely set aside while living, for it is said to be a nothingness, Thomson instead follows Heidegger's lead, for whom the question of whether or not death involves annihilation is said to remain unknowable. In another lengthy footnote, Thomson observes,

> "Heidegger is careful to acknowledge that the phenomenological necessity of methodologically privileging what Dasein can experience (in our *being-here*) with respect to death and demise remains neutral on the religious question of whether or not there is any life after demise, an issue in terms of which *Being and Time* thereby remains methodologically *agnostic* (rather than either theistic or atheistic, which as would-be philosophical positions—Heidegger provocatively maintains—both equally commit themselves untenably to knowing something unknowable, such as whether or not some afterlife might be found on the far side of Dasein's great experiential beyond."[9]

Nevertheless, Thomson himself at times slips into assuming what these qualifications are said to forbid asserting. "In demise," he says, "I experience the terminal collapse of my world. But this experience is ultimately paradoxical, because I do not live through demise to be there at the end."[10] Most of the time, however, he is careful to characterize what demise involves in language ("apparent," "seems to be," "at least from 'this side,'" "so far as we can tell phenomenologically," etc.) designed not to assert that death is nothingness. "As far as we can tell phenomenologically, in demise we will not 'be here' (as Dasein) either to enjoy or to suffer from not being here"[11]; "The apparent annihilation of our individual existences that we ordinarily call 'death' seems to be characterized by *the absence of all experience*"[12]; "Understood as this final collision with (or return to) a cosmic nothingness that remains ultimately incomprehensible (at least from 'this side' of that great beyond, the only side to which *phenomenology* has direct access), demise itself remains inaccessible to phenomeonology"[13]; "For, if we think of Dasein's 'end' as mortal demise, then our Dasein will not be whole until we have demised, but once we have demised we will not *be* whole, since we will no longer 'be here' at all (at least so far as we can tell phenomenologically)."[14]

Yet the notion of a "this-side of the mortal veil," as Thomson puts it, distorts the fact that there is no such clean separation between "this life" and what lies beyond the time that leads to death. Just as Hägglund's atheism before, here too Thomson's agnosticism ignores that God has spoken through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The future of a bodily resurrection has been proclaimed. Eternal life has been promised to all those who follow him. The veil has been lifted.

---

[8] Thomson, *Rethinking Death in and after Heidegger*, 208n1.
[9] Thomson, *Rethinking Death in and after Heidegger*, 27n49.
[10] Thomson, *Rethinking Death in and after Heidegger*, 53.
[11] Thomson, *Rethinking Death in and after Heidegger*, 60n91.
[12] Thomson, *Rethinking Death in and after Heidegger*, 104.
[13] Thomson, *Rethinking Death in and after Heidegger*, 105.
[14] Thomson, *Rethinking Death in and after Heidegger*, 230.

To appeal, then, to any supposed fixed boundary between this world and the time that leads to death, on the one hand, and what lies beyond it and eternity, on the other, is to ignore the *promise* of eternal life. For, whether one accepts it or not, it is received, or rejected, here and now on this side of death. And if there is no experiential basis on which one can definitively claim to know that nothing but nothingness alone follows death, so too there is no basis on which one can flatly deny the possibility that the promise of eternal life has been issued from beyond the time that leads to death.

With Heidegger, and so also Hägglund and Thomson, Jean-Luc Marion observes that death shapes our entire existence as its "ultimate possibility."[15] As he notes, however, it is utter supposition to claim to know, as Hägglund does and Thomson does with the occasional hedge, that death will be the end of all experience. In a long passage worth quoting in its entirety, Marion highlights the hollowness of any false pretention to know that death is annihilation. He writes,

> "[T]he death of the present does not even allow me to access the present of my death, for a reason too obvious to explain at length: my death, which I still know nothing about, could come without me experiencing or learning anything about it. At least if we suppose that death destroys the living, body and spirit, then when it intervenes, it will prevent my every experience of this death. Of course, such a definition of death remains by law a simple supposition, strictly speaking a prejudice, a judgment before an experience that no one has ever been able to return from to give us a report. This prejudice still keeps enough plausibility to forbid feigning any hypothesis about what death would teach me about my time, about what it was, about what it is at the end. Many will be witnesses or spectators of my death, but it could be that I am the only one to see nothing of it, to know nothing, to experience nothing; exactly like for my birth, an event about which I alone know nothing. Hence the conclusion of popular philosophy: there is nothing to fear in death because I will never experience it, for as long as I can experience anything, it is not there, and, when it will be there, I will no longer be there to experience it. Yet this is a weak and specious argument. Specious, first of all, because once again, nothing assures us that death, my death, eliminates mind as well as body (nor even its materiality, which, who knows, could change 'in the twinkling of an eye' (1 Cor 15:52)."[16]

What is objectionable, then, about the typical justifications offered for leading a life wholly concerned with "this life," and it alone, is not simply that that it incorrectly concludes that immortality is impossible, or even that it implausibly feigns no acquaintance with God's claim on that life, but rather that it obviously contradicts itself when, right after alleging there to be no evidence for the reality of eternity's claim on this life, it then immediately turns around and claims to know this on the basis of knowing that death is nothingness. Hägglund commits this inconsistency when, while not mentioning Christ by name, he explicitly rejects the very possibility of the resurrection: "It is because the dead cannot be brought back to life—because

---

[15] Marion, *Revelation Comes from Elsewhere*, 359.
[16] Marion, *Revelation Comes from Elsewhere*, 359-360.

they are irredeemably dead—that we are responsible for them."[17] But truth be told, this is simply a flagrant pseudo-eschatological claim masquerading as commonsense. Someone who claims to have experienced the call of Christ can at least appeal to what he believes has made itself manifest to him, yet the one who maintains that there can be no such call, and so in turn no promise of a resurrection, on the basis that he knows that death is nothingness, says all of this with no evidence whatsoever. Unlike the evidence for the promise, for which those who respond affirmatively can be said to have evidence, there is no such phenomenological evidence for the secularist's conviction that death is annihilation. It is pure assertion.

When measuring the dangers of this atheistic doublemindedness, we can do no better than to consult the words of Jean-Yves Lacoste, who, in a passage concerning the evidence conferring legitimacy on eschatological claims, says the following.

> "And if we wish to measure the real threats posed by false belief, then everyday truths and errors must be relegated to the background, and it is pseudo-eschatologies, and the illusory evidences accompanying them, to which we must pay attention. Eschatology, because it is the offspring of *logos*, the discourse par excellence that has the last word, and the last word on everything. Because the end is necessarily to come, we cannot verify discourses or theories that claim to speak truly of our absolute future. But if it is indeed certain that we do not have the right to say just about anything regarding this absolute future (if it is therefore certain, *a priori*, that there is necessarily a place for legitimate and rational eschatological claims), it is also indeed certain that attributing an eschatological status to a false belief and to the false evidences bound up with it constitutes a graver danger than everyday pseudo-evidences, which at most betray our lack of information."[18]

That death is nothingness is a claim—without evidence. It appears, if anything, to be rooted in the perverse hope that we will be annihilated upon our death, or at a minimum, the supposed tranquil acceptance of such a fact— which again, in any case, is without evidence. (And although here is not the place to answer the question, we cannot help but pose it: if not evidence, what then motivates such a belief?)

We are therefore now fully entitled to proceed on the conviction that the promise of eternal life has been experienced. And in so doing, we open space to clarify the meaning of prayer, with an eye to understanding sleep in light of this promise, rather than solely in light of a finite time closed off to anything beyond the time that leads to death. In nightly prayer before falling asleep, we respond to the fact that sleep itself interrupts the illusion of our worldly self-sufficiency, since each night that we sleep, the world persists and carries on without us, consciousness is suspended (whatever complexities dreaming may introduce), and the next day, if we are blessed to receive one, is an awakening that arrives as a gift, not as an act of our willing.

There are many kinds of sleep. The sleep of despair, in which the depressed attempts to escape daily existence by receding into what, short of suicide, is the closest thing to death. The

---

[17] Hägglund, *This Life*, 61-62.
[18] Lacoste, *Theses on Truth*, 72.

sleep of physical exhaustion, in which the worker collapses into bed early and is shortly enveloped. The sleep of bliss, in which the youth who is excited about his future hastens tomorrow to come. The fitful sleep of the lovesick, in which the lover can think of nothing besides his beloved. Here, for example, one thinks of Stendhals's masterpiece, *The Red and the Black*, in which Madame de Rênal, passionately in love with Julien Sore, reaches such a state of agitation and euphoria that "happiness robbed her of sleep."[19] The sleep of routine, in which, by contrast, someone goes to bed at the usual time, and thinks almost indifferently about the mundanities of the day's events, or the day to come. The thin sleep of worry, in which the troubled finds no rest, instead pondering whatever is weighing on him, whether it be financial concerns, health fears, or the problems of some loved one. And finally, insomnia, which, as the very deprivation of sleep, makes the phenomenon of sleep present in virtue of its tormenting absence.

These kinds of sleep have histories of their own. They unfold, not just nightly, which is to say daily, but in light of previous days too—sometimes in cycles that reach back weeks, even years. And they intersect one another, too. Just as the same red is really a quite different red depending on whether it is woolly or shiny, so too a particular kind of sleep varies in accord with the tonality of its surrounding patterns. A month of routine sleep can be punctuated by a night of insomnia, which in turn may be followed by a series of worried sleeps, until eventually the rhythm of routine sleep is returned restored. The entire time, each sleep forms an instance in a series, or a period, of sleeps.

Our sleep even exhibits its own seasons depending on the season of life one finds oneself: the sleep of a very young boy waiting for Christmas morning is far different than that of the directionless and sensitive twenty-something college graduate, which again is far different than that of the jaded middle-aged man who regrets his life, or again the ailing elderly man who now, owing to the realities of time, must wonder whether he will even wake up tomorrow, or whether tonight will be his last night on earth. But in any case, its distinctive peculiarities aside, each night's sleep is always potentially a premonition of death, a moment of judgment, an encounter with vulnerability, and, for the one who has learned what this precariousness of sleep teaches, an opportunity to respond to that fragile condition by turning his attention to God in prayer.

Hence, to each mode of sleep, its own mode of prayer. For as anyone who has developed the habit of night watches learns, our nocturnal thoughts establish a rhythm of their own. Our prayer, which always preserves an element of spontaneity, builds its own familiar surroundings: we tend to pray for the same people, pray about the same concerns, pray in gratitude for the same blessings, pray for the same wisdom that is uniquely ours to need.

At night, in prayer, when the city sleeps, we traverse the halls of eternity. (Perhaps it is night's call of eternity that drew Dickens on his long, nighttime London walks.)

Yet prayer is never either purely active or purely passive. It is always responsive. And for that reason, it involves an element of free-association, or play. For instance, I might begin a prayer by silently reciting a particular Scripture that has come to mind. The Scripture, in turn, reminds me of some lingering worry that I had not been facing. So, I pray, trusting God that he will resolve the matter. Perhaps I then in turn pray to God for the strength and gratitude to

[19] Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, 61.

accept whatever outcome will follow. This train of prayer appears to have now run its course, and so now I am left with a moment of decision: how to continue? What to pray next? I may seek out another Scripture, whether it is related to the first or not. Or perhaps someone's face enters my consciousness: it is an old friend I have not seen or spoken to in years, or an acquaintance who I assume probably never gives me any thought outside our brief daily social interaction. Now I have entered the realm of freedom. And with that, there is the attendant recognition that the prayer's love exceeds the ordinary. Before I know it, then, I am praying for a long litany of people, many of whom I may not have seen in years. (One might try to pray for every single person that one can remember from one's third-grade class.) Soon, we realize that it is impossible to pray for everyone by name or even by face. And, in any case, it is impossible to pray for any one person exhaustively. I can just as well pray for someone's eternal salvation as I can that a mundane upcoming business appointment he has goes well. How to choose? The available options with which I'm presented would be simply overwhelming were we not able to discern in our particular circumstances what we should choose to pray for in light of what God himself calls us to pray about. And this is just another reason for a prayer of praise. For we may always justifiably pray to God for allowing us to at least pray the best that we can, however limited and feeble the prayer may be. Prayer's limitations remind us of God's almightiness. This prayer for others, thus, which began with the simple recital of a Scripture, now ends with a prayer of praise to God for it having unfolded as it has, for he is the one who is able to look after and love all those whom our own prayers do not mention or touch.

This is just one very precise train of prayers. There are an infinite number of such journeys a night's prayer may travel. We can pray for our enemies, we can pray for our friends, we can pray for strangers, acquaintances, loved ones, in some Christian traditions, it is said that we are even permitted to pray for the dead. Prayer, which is an expression of God's love and of our response to it, is limitless.

It would not be mere metaphor to say that, in nightly prayer, we accordingly undertake a voyage that God has sent us to take. But no matter how our nightly prayers unfold, no matter where they take us, they must always return to the same port from which they set sail. They must end with a recognition of our mortality. While we may be tempted to assume that we will wake tomorrow, that there will be a tomorrow, such an expectation is only that—an expectation. And if it is not recognized for the expectation that it is, then it becomes presumption. After all, for all we know, tonight may be our last. Every time that we climb into bed, we in a sense therefore climb into our deathbed. And so, every nightly prayer must involve gratitude to God, for his forgiveness, for his mercy, for his patience, for his righteousness, for his love—for everything we have thus far received of him, and for everything we hope still to receive, including, if we are fortunate, the gift of another day.

As David says, "at night my heart instructs me" (Ps 16:7). These night thoughts (the one who keeps vigil is skilled in thinking with his heart), which form the threads of our night watches, silence the distractions and diversions of the day's hustle and bustle. They deliver us over to a solitude in which we can finally begin thinking of others, if we had not been already, by first responding to God. This is because, in response to the instruction that comes from the Word who speaks in the heart, soliciting our reply, the prayers we offer in return teach us about ourselves. Our strengths, our weakness, our concerns, our hopes, our regrets, our needs, our blessings—man learns about himself nowhere else more than in prayer.

We do not deign to have offered an exhaustive topography of prayer—even if such a task were possible, it would be unnecessary for present purposes. One only need think of Daniel's sleeping in the lions' den, Peter and Paul sleeping in prison, Christ sleeping on the boat, or the sleeping disciples in Gethsemane to recognize that there always remains more to be said about the varieties of sleep and the kinds of prayer that attend them. Instead, we have merely offered some limited reflections on our nocturnal meditations. It is not nothing if they do something to brighten the day of someone who hears them.

Kierkegaard is well-known for his discourses on prayer. There is no need to discuss those here. Nor is there need to discuss his work *The Sickness Unto Death*, to which this paper's title is an obvious and deliberate allusion. And although it is tempting to turn to *Fear and Trembling*, if only because that is Kierkegaard's text which Hägglund himself in *This Life* discusses, with an eye to concluding this present meditation on sleep and death, it is to another text of Kierkegaard's to which we will turn, because it directly examines the connection between sleep and life.

The text in question is *For Self-Examination/Judge for Yourself!*. In it, Kierkegaard speaks of "spiritual intoxication."[20] To borrow Kierkegaard's own turn of phrase, such a one has not yet "become sober." By that, he means to describe the state of someone who, thinking he is awake, in fact is going through life while still asleep. Just as we can sleep through a day, so too we can sleep through life as a whole. For, taking ourselves to be independent of God, sufficient to ourselves, wholly preoccupied with the affairs of this life, we remain "intoxicated," insensitive to the call of eternal life. Not only does such a one fail to pray without ceasing, he may well not pray at all, even in the night hours before sleep. And for this reason, notes Kierkegaard, he *is* asleep, for he has not yet awoken to the light of Christ. He is the sleepwalker, for he stumbles in darkness, rather than walking in the light of Christ.

And as Kierkegaard observes, whoever lives daily with no thought for the fact that one day he will die, or who lives thinking that in any case, when it does arrive, death will be nothingness, finds himself in a worse position than the rich man who stored up treasure in his barns, only to die unexpectedly before ever being able to use it (Luke 12:16-21). "Where will I go when I die?" is a question the sleepwalker never seriously asks himself. Whereas the rich man was caught unprepared for what he assumed would be an indefinite eventuality, whoever lives strictly for "this life," as if there is nothing beyond it, does not even begin to prepare for the eventuality of life after death. In a word, as Kierkegaard would say, he is already dead, since he has not only accorded death the last word, but nothingness as such.

But it is entirely otherwise for the former sleeper who no longer sleeps the sleep of death. He has awoken to a day illuminated by the promise of eternal life. Not only does that mean he keeps watch at night by praying before falling asleep. Now, everything is done in the light of day, which is to say, before-God. Existence for him becomes a vigil.[21] And as vigil, it is a life lived in attentiveness to the promise.

But what, then, of the one who does not live life sleeplessly, but rather lives it asleep, by responding to the promise of eternal life in a fashion that merely ignores, resists, or otherwise suppresses its call? Truth be told, he will die in his sleep. Ordinarily, we speak of the one who dies in his sleep as if this were merely a circumstantial matter, a happenstantial fact about that

---

[20] Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination/Judge for Yourself!*, 93-143.

[21] See Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 77-97.

individual's personal demise, whether the death is unexpected and sudden, or instead the culmination of a protracted illness marked by inexorable decline. Phenomenologically speaking, however, this expression, "to die in one's sleep," must be understood as a claim of essence, for it is true of anyone who has not yet awoken to righteousness, who, in short, has lived the fulness of his life's days in darkness, never having awoken to the light of Christ. Of such a sleeper, the empirical particularities of his demise notwithstanding, it is frightfully true to say that he has indeed died in his sleep—or better, died while still already asleep. His demise simply underscores the reality of that condition, that he lived dead asleep, asleep in the darkness of a living death that had never known the awakening of the eternal life in Jesus Christ that was promised to him, if only he had awoken from his sleepwalking. In the end, his demise attests to what his waking life already did, namely, that he had lived a sleep unto death.

Nevertheless, the one who is asleep, who has not yet awoken to righteousness and to the light of Christ, will seek what he wishes to view as reasons that explain, sustain, and justify his unbelief in the promise of eternal life. And if he knows he cannot credibly claim to be in a position to know that such a call is merely an outright acoustic illusion, then he will instead have to resort to other reasons that are thought to suggest the promise is to be distrusted on other grounds. And where else would the final refuge for such doubt be sought but in the figure of the visible sleeper?

No doubt the most compelling, and indeed troubling, blow to hope in the promise of eternal life, and so the bodily resurrection, lies before us in the figure of the beloved's body that sleeps the sleep of death, which is to say, the corpse. Monet and Hodler's studies of the sleeping body, epitomized most viscerally in the paintings of their respective beloved sprawled lifelessly on the deathbed, initially appear to reveal nothing beyond the loss and grief shown in the encounter with what is thought to be death's irrevocable silence. And here, as further evidence of painting's ability to disclose death's evident last word on life, one might call to mind Holbein's painting of the dead Christ that so haunted Dostoevsky. Yet when we look at what is shown, whether in person or on the canvass, do we in fact see nothing more than a corpse? Or, said differently, does the depiction of the one presently sleeping the sleep of death reveal anything that essentially forecloses the future of a resurrection? By no means. Far from extinguishing our faith in the promise of the bodily resurrection, the most sober gaze sees that, in light of this promise that defies what the visible discloses, nothing is impossible with God. And when we respond to that promise and choose to look again, this time with a gaze aided by that promise's instruction, we see a glimmer of life, after all—an invisible presence revealing the sleeper's body to be just that: asleep, destined to awaken and thus rise from sleep.

To conclude, we may revisit Chrétien's observation regarding the sleeping body.[22] For those with eyes to see, even the figure of the sleeper no longer now portends death, but rather the promise of the Resurrection. For, in this moment of awakening, even the fear of the sleep of death is overcome. Each night need not be seen to end in darkness, but in light, in a sleep that relinquishes itself to a transit that does not necessarily promise tomorrow, to be sure, but instead a future that deepens the beauty and wonder of all of our days. This sweet sleep drifts off, aglow in the light of the dawning of the truth of the promise of eternal life in Jesus Christ. It is no longer a sleep unto death, but one unto life.

---

[22] Chrétien, *Hand to Hand*, 77-78.

Acknowledgments

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Jean-Louis Chrétien. I remember the waters you showed me.

Bibliography

Chrétien, Jean-Louis. *Hand to Hand: Listening to the Work of Art*. Translated by Stephen E. Lewis. New York: Fordham University Press, 2003.

Hägglund, Martin. *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2019.

Kearney, Richard. "Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology." In *After God: Returning to God After God*, edited by John Panteleimon Manoussakis. New York: Fordham University Press.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *For Self-Examination/Judge for Yourself!*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Lacoste, Jean-Yves. *Experience and the Absolute: Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man*. Translated by Mark Raftery-Skehan. New York: Fordham University Press, 2004.

Lacoste, Jean-Yves. *Theses on Truth*. Translated by Steven DeLay. Eugene, OR: Cascade, forthcoming.

Marion, Jean-Luc. *Revelation Comes from Elsewhere: A Contribution to a Critical History and a Phenomenal Concept of Revelation*. Translated by Stephen E. Lewis and Stephanie Rumpza. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024.

Stendhal. *The Red and the Black*. Translated by Roger Gard. New York: Penguin, 2002.

Thomson, Iain. *Rethinking Death in and after Heidegger*. Paperback Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025.